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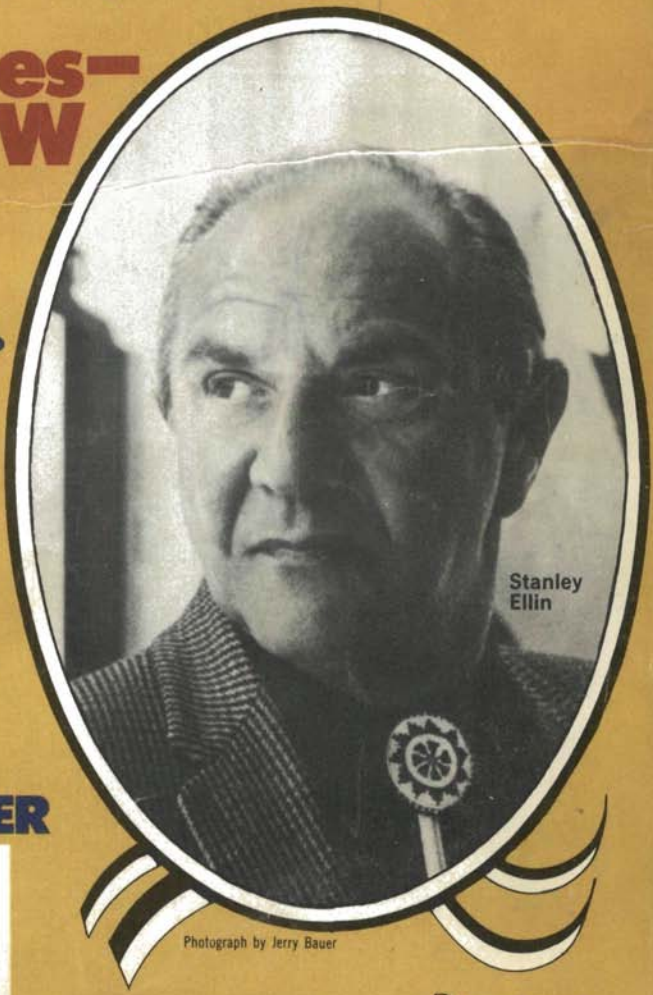

Stanley Ellin

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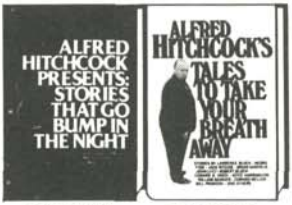

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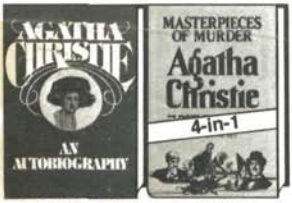

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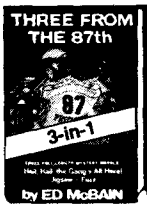

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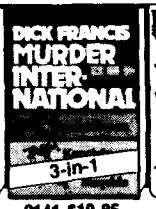

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a *NEW* short story by

STANLEY ELLIN

"I was once there, my friend. And with these two eyes I witnessed a crime so depraved, so horrid, that I still shudder at the memory of it."

JUST DESSERTS

by STANLEY ELLIN

To those like myself who, though American born and bred, are addicted to *haute cuisine* in the grand tradition of Escoffier—calories beyond counting and each one the devil's delight—the Restaurant Sacoche on the narrow rue Sacoche near the Bourse is the greatest restaurant in Paris, meaning, of course, the world. Small, unpretentious, and democratic of spirit, it does not feature its clientele but its food. Anyone who can scan a truly staggering bill at the conclusion of his repast without the blood perceptibly draining from his face is welcome here. Of course, reservations must be made well in advance or else there is nothing left to do but glumly settle for such as Lapérouse or La Tour d'Argent.

The reason for the divine place of La Sacoche in the culinary order is simply stated: the presiding genius of its kitchen is Georges Bordeloup himself, that emperor among mere kings as even his peers grudgingly acknowledge. He looks the part, too. Short and stout, with a formidable mustache and an air of calm command, he wears his starched white chef's *toque* like the crown of an emperor.

An awesome figure, yet he can unbend on occasion. That evening in question he did unbend. It was close to midnight, my dinner companions had left for their homes while I, a hotel dweller, remained alone at our table savoring a cognac and cigar. The restaurant almost deserted now, the day's work done, Monsieur Georges,

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as was his custom, seated himself at a table near the kitchen door to enjoy his own repast.

When in the mood he had marvelous tales to tell of culinary triumphs, so as he happened to glance my way I raised my glass to him in a toast trusting this would earn me an invitation to join him, and it did. His repast was simple—indeed, gemlike in its simplicity—a *gras-double,* which is a Bordeloup specialty of tripe simmered in minced onions and herbs and a vast improvement over the drearily familiar *tripes à la mode de Caen*—and it was accompanied by nothing more than a loaf of bread and a bottle of champagne. He tucked away a mouthful and washed it down with a glass of champagne before remarking to me with rough good humor, "So it's back here to Paris once again, eh? The airlines must be growing rich on that employer of yours in New York, my friend."

"Possibly. But," I said teasingly, "if you were to open a discreet little restaurant of your own in my country—"

"Ah, no!" He held up both hands in protest. "Don't even say it. Your country? Never." His face was bleak. "The nature of the crimes that can take place there—"

"Oh, come. What you read in the papers—"

"I was once there, my friend. And with these two eyes I witnessed a crime so depraved, so horrid, that I still shudder at the memory of it." He fortified himself with another glass of champagne. "Perhaps I should tell you about it. Of course, if you feel it may wound your patriotic feelings—"

"No, no," I said. "Go right ahead."

"Very well," said he, "I will. Just remember afterwards that it is with your consent."

It all commenced (said Monsieur Georges) on a July afternoon during that tranquil period between lunch and dinner when the restaurant is empty. I was seated at this very table having a small collation—a slice or two of Bayonne ham garnished with fresh figs—when a stranger approached me. A young man, plainly an American, very tall, thin, and with sunburned features, especially the nose. An amiable type with an engaging awkwardness about him. "Mr. Bordeloup," said he, "may I have a word with you, sir?"

I was moved by curiosity. "You may," I said.

"Mighty kind of you, sir," he said. He seated himself and handed me a small card on which was inscribed *Herbert Dobson, Sunshine Spread, Texas.* "That's me," he said. "And the reason I'm here is

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that some people whose judgment I trust told me you were the finest chef to be found anywhere."

"Their judgment is correct," I assured him.

"Right. I found that out sure enough when I was eating here this week. I also found out that this restaurant closes up for the whole month of August. Now I want to offer you a business proposition. I want to hire your services for that month. All you have to do, sir, is name your price and pack your bags."

I could not believe my ears. "You wish to engage me as your personal chef for that period?"

"Well now," said the fellow apologetically, "it's a little more than just chef. What I really want you to do is give me some cooking lessons. I know my way around French cooking already—done quite a bit of it—but now I need some real blue-ribbon expert help at it."

I should have been outraged by his astounding presumption, but, in truth, he was so ingenuous in manner that I found myself a trifle amused by it. I said, "In a nutshell, I, Georges Bordeloup, who have spent a lifetime mastering the sacred art of *la cuisine classique,* am now to repair to your distant home in the wilderness and there make you master of it in precisely one month? No, no, Monsieur Dobson. This joke has gone far enough, and since I wish to lunch in privacy—"

"Believe me, sir, it's no joke. And I'm not looking to learn the whole art. All I want to do is turn out some choice samples of it. Especially your kind of soufflé." His sunburned features took on an ecstatic expression, the kind of muttonheaded expression a very youthful poet might wear while inscribing a poem to his beloved. "A really great soufflé. And all you have to do, Mr. Bordeloup, is name your price. Any price at all."

I regarded him with scorn. "Oh, indeed? And what if I were to demand a hundred thousand francs? Or better yet, why not a million?"

"Why not?" said he eagerly, whipping out a checkbook. Then as I sat there struck dumb by astonishment he filled out a check and thrust it at me. "Good for a million at the Banque de Paris," he said. "Just phone them now, and they'll confirm that."

And that was how only three days later, my brain still in a whirl, I found myself descending in his private airplane—a monstrous jet plane with full accoutrement of sitting room, bedrooms, and baths—to the airport in the city of Houston of the state of Texas.

At this point I must note that like any sensible Frenchman I have no enthusiasm for travel to foreign cities. What is such travel after

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all but a series of inconveniences inevitably landing one in an unattractive metropolis crowded with strangers? It was a relief therefore to find that the residence of Herbert Dobson where I was to undergo my month's penance was outside the boundaries of the singularly unattractive city of Houston. Sunshine Spread, it appeared, was a suburban community of enormously wealthy Texans, scions of those oil tycoons who had originally filled the family coffers with gold. Magic coffers indeed, because no matter how deep the following generations dipped into them they remained overflowing. Unbelievable, yes, but true.

If evidence of this was needed, it was provided by those vast estates which comprised Sunshine Spread. Despite their grotesque architecture, the Sun King himself, our Louis Fourteenth, would have been impressed by them. The dimensions of them, their furnishings, the landscaping, the equipage, the host of servants, all indicated what even a tribe of primitives could do about their living accommodations given unlimited wealth to do it with.

Most interesting—even touching—was the discovery that the primitives occupying this community had come to feel a dim yearning for civilization, the first evidence of which is always to be found in *la cuisine*. World travelers on a fantastic scale—they took flight in their airplanes to foreign places as one would take a stroll to the nearest bistro—they had discovered with enthusiasm the raptures of fine cookery such as I for one could provide.

Here it is necessary to explain two curious qualities in these male Texans. One is a compulsion to display a prowess at cookery, most often demonstrated by what is known in that region as the barbecue. A sort of savage rite, in fact, which consists of placing bloody portions of cattle on an open fire until they are charred beyond recognition and then smearing them with sauces that are not merely an abomination but a punishment.

Their other notable quality is an instinct for competition that borders on madness. Not to beat your neighbor into the dust with your fists—that had been the crude practice of their ancestors, as I was given to understand—but to beat his pride into the dust and joyously leap up and down on its tattered vestiges, ah, there was the true richness of life as these inhabitants of Sunshine Spread saw it.

The result? Inevitably a contest among them in *la cuisine*. It had even become a contest surrounded by formalities. Precisely twelve of them—a round dozen—had banded into a fanatical fraternity

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which gathered on the last Friday evening of each month at a different estate to share dinner. Each dinner, so the rules went, must be prepared in its entirety by its host, and each must demonstrate a mastery of *la grande cuisine* down to the selection of the sorbet used for clearing the palate between courses. At the conclusion of the repast would be a solemn discussion of its merits and deficiencies, and either an accolade bestowed on its chef, or a shrug of the shoulders, or, tragically, a contemptuous shake of the head.

And, as Herbert Dobson assured me, his eyes alight with the challenge, accolades were notoriously hard to come by. Now he was determined to win one when, on the last Friday of this month of August, he would be host of the occasion.

I must admit that during those first few days when I was being introduced with almost embarrassing reverence to the other members of this fraternity I took the matter a bit lightly. After all, how far must a Georges Bordeloup extend himself to overwhelm these childlike barbarians, even through such an unlikely instrument as Herbert Dobson? I soon learned better. These men, with the same demonic intensity with which their grandpapas had undertaken to sharpen their knives for the taming of the American wilderness, had undertaken to sharpen their palates to an exquisite edge. All, including my young friend Herbert, knew their way around a kitchen. All could pass the most severe tests in the judgment of a serious wine. No need to ask where so many of the finest vintages of France had disappeared to in recent years. Apparently, most of them were stored in the cellars of Sunshine Spread.

A formidable challenge, but after all I am Georges Bordeloup. So to work, first in the selection of a menu. Here I determined to play a little trick on the fraternity. Lately, I was informed, it had been engaged in a duel of extravaganzas, pitting the most elaborate dishes against each other. How effective then, to take the opposite direction. To present only some basic dishes of *la cuisine bourgeoise* which is, after all, the heart and soul, the very foundation on which *la grande cuisine* has been constructed.

Thus, as in a symphony, an opening of hot sausage in crust and artichokes on foie gras simply to sound the theme. Then *truite en bleu* followed by quail potted with fresh grapes to develop it *accelerando*. Then a masterstroke, responding as it would to the local taste for beef, an *entrecôte Florentine*. And for the wine list, the most clever device of all: a single wine, champagne. A Dom Perignon of excellent year which, as a sensitive piano accompanist rounds out

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the perfection of the violinist's efforts, would support to perfection every dish of the prescribed menu.

One problem then presented itself.

In the selection of a dessert my otherwise pliant protégé insisted that nothing would do but a soufflé. And no mere soufflé but my exquisite *soufflé Bordeloup* which he had sampled at the Restaurant Sacoche. He was obsessed by this concept, his sunburned nose glowing even redder as he vehemently defended it against all argument.

Need I tell anyone of intelligence, as I tried to tell him, that this was a highly dangerous move on which to risk his accolade? A proper soufflé is an ethereal and timorous creation, and everything in cruel nature conspires against it. It must be served instantly on removal from the oven, and in that perilous instant the least disturbance can mean its ignominious collapse into wrinkled failure. In view of this, as I pleaded with my protégé, how much better a charming mousse or perhaps the dramatic and non-collapsible crêpes Suzette.

But he was adamant. In fact, he pointed out, it was the very risk which made the *soufflé Bordeloup* an essential element of the dinner. Others of the fraternity had lately taken to experimenting with various exotic soufflés, only to fail disastrously. It was not always a case of the concoction's collapsing at the moment of truth. Some hopefuls had come up with recipes guaranteeing to avoid that, but, as was bound to happen, such products always emerged with the consistency of a pudding, more deplorable even than the process of deflation. No, no, said young Herbert stubbornly, the dessert must be a *soufflé Bordeloup,* light as thistledown, succulent as ambrosia, delivered to the table in all its glory. It would be the burning envy of the fraternity. It would stir the same emotions, he assured me earnestly, as if the university of the state of Texas were to beat the university of the state of Oklahoma in a game of football.

His very words. A game of football. I ask anyone to make sense of that.

But considering his emotionalism I yielded the issue. A *soufflé Bordeloup* it would be, and under my instruction why should he not succeed in this coup? And as the time passed I gained increasing confidence in him. We spent endless hours in that luxurious kitchen which, as was true of all the kitchens of the Sunshine Spread, was completely exposed to the dining room. My demonstrations appeared to be working well too, because he was a passionately dedicated student who allowed nothing to distract him from the pursuit of his goal.

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Nothing.

Not even a distraction which insisted on presenting itself to him. And what else would that be but a female of the species?

I must make known at once that this was not a *femme fatale,* a veritable Delilah. Far from it. Her name was Bobby Jo Butterworth, daughter of a Monsieur J. F. Butterworth, one of the most rich and powerful of this community, and she was very young—of that age when the child has just discovered her womanhood—and was goldenhaired, blue-eyed, and dimpled, with a shape most pleasantly rounded.

She also shared with the females of that region an attribute one does not find in any other American women, an awesome respect for the male and a willingness to acknowledge that he is, as God intended, her superior. Thus where other women may be bold in the demonstration of their desires, the smitten Bobby Jo Butterworth demonstrated hers by a trembling, wide-eyed yearning when in Herbert Dobson's presence. As the sunflower inclines toward the sun, so she inclined toward the man she had obviously marked as her future lord and master.

The informal manners of the community worked in her favor too. There, one did not knock at the door to be admitted to a neighboring home; when in the mood one merely entered it, that was all. Bobby Jo Butterworth, I soon observed, took full advantage of this privilege. Seek out Herbert Dobson, and there she was, a silent, adoring presence nearby.

Most of the time, of necessity, this meant she was planted on a high stool in a corner of the kitchen observing my education of her Prince Charming. Plainly, a little of this went a long way with her. After a while she would be hard put to conceal those small signs indicating that she was being bored to distraction: the drooping eyelids, the stifled yawns, the furtive glances at the watch.

Then she would screw up her courage and in honeyed tones attempt to make him aware of her existence and to lure him from his lessons with reminders of the delights awaiting them elsewhere: a horseback ride, a swimming party, a game of baseball in the arena of the city of Houston, even a rendezvous with picnic basket in the nearby woodland.

To all these sweet supplications he remained deaf and blind, such was his fierce devotion to his chosen task. In the end, there was a deplorable scene played out in my presence. Caught up the evening before by experimentation on the batter for a proper soufflé, he had

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forgotten that this was an evening when he was to dine *en famille* at the Butterworth estate. The next day, Bobby Jo made known to him the humiliation this had caused her. More than that, she expressed the opinion that in his order of priorities she now appeared to rank far below his cooking pots. Was that the truth? And if so, was it not time for a reordering of priorities?

Herbert appeared stricken by this, bewildered, of an apologetic disposition. However, at that perilous instant he discovered he was stirring a fine batter in the wrong direction, and, the true chef, hastily devoted himself to the correction of this error while angrily railing at himself for his carelessness. I could not have been prouder of him than I was at that moment.

On the other hand, his fair supplicant gave him a long mournful look as he bent to his labors and then turned on her heel and departed. Nor did she make any further appearance on the scene as the time moved close for the grand dinner. I saw with relief that Herbert seemed entirely unaware of her absence, devoting himself now only to the intricacies of the *soufflé Bordeloup.*

One does not lightly divulge the recipe for such a creation, but there can be no harm in explaining that where your ordinary soufflé in the oven rises in rounded loveliness above the level of its baking dish and, with only minute diminution, holds to that level as it is removed from the oven, the *soufflé Bordeloup* poses a special challenge. A collar of oiled paper as wide as one's little finger is long has been fixed around the neck of the baking dish and so the soufflé is required to rise and maintain itself that additional height. Imagine the blowing of a dazzling soap bubble larger than you had ever dreamed it could be blown and then the maintaining of it until you yourself invite its dissolution, that will give some idea of the delicacy of this project.

Then consider the mastery of the project that Herbert Dobson finally obtained when, after endless nerve-racking failures, he could draw from the oven one perfect *soufflé Bordeloup* after another. I knew then that no one, with the exception of myself, could have been better equipped to meet the challenge of that impending dinner.

The company for the dinner arrived long before its designated hour to make sure I had no part in its preparation. I was to be an honored guest, that was all. The others gathered in the kitchen ascertaining that everything done was the handiwork of Herbert alone and engaging in some heavy-handed jesting about that han-

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diwork which in no way disconcerted him. He was, in fact, as cool as a cucumber.

At the table itself when the time came we were waited upon by half a dozen skilled servitors, and here the initial reaction to the early courses appeared to be puzzlement at their very simplicity. Then, as the theme of the menu dawned on all, puzzlement became admiration. More than admiration. Awe. Nothing remained now but the presentation of the *soufflé Bordeloup* to assure Herbert's devastating triumph.

He was plainly visible at the oven as he drew the soufflé from it, the kitchen attendants standing aside breathlessly. All eyes were fixed on him as he bore the precious burden toward the table. Suddenly his rapt expression became an open-mouthed surprise. Everyone looked around toward the foot of the table to see what had occasioned this. And the sight that met us—

Monsieur Georges closed his eyes as if to blot out the memory of that sight.

"Yes?" I prompted.

"It takes all my courage to describe it. Bobby Jo Butterworth had entered silently. She stood there with a gigantic pistol clutched in her hands. She raised the pistol—"

"Good God! She shot him right there in front of you?"

Monsieur Georges looked reproachful. "My friend, I am trying to describe to you the most heinous of crimes, so please consider that for a woman to shoot the adored one who neglects her may be excessive, but it is hardly a crime. No, she did not shoot him. She raised her weapon high, and with a terrible smile on her lips and her eyes closed tight she fired a shot into the ceiling."

Enlightenment dawned. "But of course! At the reverberation of that shot, the soufflé—"

"Collapsed like a punctured balloon. A triumph one moment, a shriveled disaster the next." Monsieur Georges leaned forward and aimed a pudgy forefinger at me. "So don't try to make light of the nature of crime in America, my friend. Not when I myself witnessed there a scene that could take place nowhere else in the civilized world—the premeditated murder of an utterly flawless soufflé!"

I reflected on this. Then I said sympathetically, "And a *soufflé Bordeloup* at that."

After all, what else could I say if I didn't want to be restricted forever after to Lapérouse or La Tour d'Argent?

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a *NEW* short story by

CLARK HOWARD

Philippe Carrier was handsome, neatly bearded, and suave in manner. But he was a man in trouble, a man always on the run. On the other hand, Jack Kerry did not have to run. He could take his time, especially with Gaby . . .

A PRICE ON HIS LIFE

by CLARK HOWARD

Gaby had eyes like ripe plums, and lips that never quite closed. "There is such a thing as loyalty, you know," she said, in her precise way.

Jack Kerry nodded. "I understand that. I respect you for it. All I'm saying is, if Philippe doesn't send for you as he said he would, I think you should have something—or someone—to fall back on."

"And you think that someone should be you?"

"Yes. I think we'd make a good team. Besides, I care for you."

"How could you possibly care? You have only known me one week."

"I needed only one day."

Gaby's face softened, as if she were not used to hearing such words. They were sitting at a sidewalk café on the Avenue Franklin Roosevelt. It was October but Paris was unseasonably warm. The waiter came by and filled their glasses. They both sipped at the new wine.

"I have been with Philippe for a long time," Gaby said. "Nearly five years."

"Five years is not a long time," Kerry told her. "When you're seventy it will be a long time. But not when you're thirty."

"You do not think Philippe will send for me, do you?"

Kerry shrugged. "Philippe is a man in trouble. A man who must

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run. 'He travels fastest who travels alone!' I forget who said that."

"It may be so, what you say, but when he gets where he is going, he will not be running any more. He could send for me then."

Kerry looked away, down the street where it ended at the Seine. "Perhaps. But in the five years you've been with him, has there ever been a time when he *wasn't* running? From something? From someone? The only difference this time is that it appears to be considerably more serious than usual."

"How do you know so much?" she asked with an edge. "You have only known Philippe one week also."

"True. But I've known many Philippes before him. He's really quite ordinary, you know. A user and a loser. The world is full of Philippes."

Gaby's nostrils flared. "It would be very easy to become angry with you," she said.

Kerry nodded. "Yes. Things that are not in one's own best interest are always easy to do."

Gaby pushed her glass of wine away. "You are so sure of everything. So smug and confident. I do not think I like you any more. And I do not think I want to have you to fall back on even if Philippe does not send for me." She was up and buckling the belt of her trenchcoat before her words ended. Kerry stood but did not try to dissuade her from leaving. He said nothing, merely watched in silence as she stalked away. She had a brisk, long-legged stride even when she was not angry, so she was quickly gone down the leaf-strewn sidewalk.

Kerry sat down. He sat in contemplative thought for a few moments, his eyes riveted to the marble tabletop. After a while he reached for her wine glass. He tilted it so that the light caught the imprint of her lips on the rim. He rubbed his thumb lightly over that imprint. Then he drank from her glass, putting his lips where hers had been . . .

Kerry had been in the bar of the Paris Hilton a week earlier, the bar on the top floor, looking down at two teams of boys playing soccer in a schoolyard in drizzling rain, when Philippe had taken a seat next to him.

"Such energy," Philippe said in near-perfect English. "If only one could bottle it for resale."

"Or save it for one's old age," Kerry said.

"Ah, yes," Philippe replied with a practised smile, "an even better

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idea. Don't sell it at all. Use it selfishly. For love, for personal achievement, for—whatever." He held out his hand. "Permit me: Philippe Carrier."

Kerry shook hands. "John J. Kerry."

"From?" Philippe asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Canada. Toronto."

"Ah, yes. I would have guessed Ireland. Your accent."

"I'm Irish by birth."

"I see. May I buy you another drink? Waiter—"

They sat together for an hour, alternately watching the soccer game and chatting. Kerry told the Frenchman that he was in international banking, on a trip to London, Paris, and Geneva to analyze certain South African mining stocks being sold exclusively in those markets. "The stocks present quite a dilemma," he pointed out. "They're so highly profitable that one absolutely hates not to invest in them, but at the same time this business of apartheid makes the government, and therefore the country's stocks, quite risky. The old rock-and-a-hard-place story."

Philippe vaguely represented himself as an entrepreneur, without specifically expounding on his exact interests. He was as smooth an individual as Kerry had ever seen—handsome, neatly bearded, suave, with an air and manner that seemed to subtly suggest that Monsieur Carrier was intellectually superior to all within his purview. Kerry decided early on that most of it was surface image, but he remained reserved and allowed Philippe to press forward with whatever his purpose was in striking up the conversation.

As it turned out, Kerry was glad he did. That was the way he met Gaby.

"Would you care to join my fiancée and me for supper?" Philippe asked at last. "We are eating at La Chamaille. If you have never been there, I am sure you will enjoy it."

"Good of you to invite me," Kerry said. "But I would never intrude on a man and his fiancée."

"Actually, Gaby is not my fiancée in the strictest sense of the word," Philippe said with a wink. "We have been together for a few years, do you understand? But I will never marry her."

Aren't you the swine, Kerry thought.

"Gaby would be delighted to have you join us," Philippe insisted. "She absolutely loves meeting new people."

I can understand why, Kerry thought. "If you're certain it won't be an intrusion," he said.

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Philippe was certain, and they taxied to the restaurant. Gaby was already there, waiting in the bar. Kerry was immediately taken with her—the ripe-plum eyes, the lips slightly parted as if in anticipation of something, the thin yet quite ample body that when she moved introduced a curve here, a contour there, under her smartly styled layer of wine-colored silk.

"But of course I am happy to have you join us, Monsieur Kerry," she said in English as precise as Philippe's. "You can tell us all about Canada. We have never been there. Is it quite cold?"

"Yes, extremely cold sometimes. Very heavy snows." Kerry thought she had the most beautiful shoulders he had ever seen on a woman.

As they walked to their table Philippe said, "Was it not in Toronto, in the Soviet Embassy there, that a Russian code clerk defected and informed on an entire Red spy ring?"

"Yes. That was some years back. The Igor Guzenko incident."

The maître d' showed them to a center table which Philippe found unsuitable. He looked around and selected one in a rather secluded corner. "I do not care for a lot of traffic while I am dining," he explained.

After they were seated and had ordered cocktails, Philippe brought up the code clerk again. "He is still living in Canada? With a new identity and all that?"

"I assume so," Kerry answered.

"Well, of course, in such a large country it must be very easy to lose oneself. Many people, I have heard, go there to begin new lives. To start over, as they say."

"Yes, it's a good country for that," Kerry admitted.

Their drinks came and Philippe proposed a toast to unexpected new friendships. When Kerry touched his glass to Gaby's, he looked into her eyes and saw something odd in them—fear, or guilt perhaps. She was certainly nervous. A moment later, after their first sip of the cocktails, she brushed her evening bag off the table. It fell between her chair and Kerry's. He immediately bent to retrieve it for her. "Thank you," she said quietly. "I am very sorry."

When Kerry looked back at his martini again, he saw several traces of white powder on his olive spear. He tensed and fixed Philippe in a cold stare. The Frenchman's self-confidence dissolved into a look of sudden apprehension, the look of a trapped animal just cornered and undecided how to escape. Kerry glanced at Gaby. What he had detected in her eyes a moment earlier—fear, guilt—now

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surfaced totally; she was clearly frightened. Kerry flicked his gaze back to Philippe. He pushed the glass toward him.

"Suppose you drink it," he said.

"Suppose I do not?" Philippe countered.

"Shall I call the police and tell them you tried to drug me?"

"It is not exactly a drug," Philippe said. "It is a rather potent laxative. All you would have got from it is very bad stomach cramps."

Kerry looked at Gaby again. She wet her lips. "It is true," she said.

"What did you expect to gain?" Kerry asked. "Were you going to pick my pocket when I got sick? The few hundred francs you'd find would hardly be worth the effort. Or is it credit cards you're after?"

"Neither," Philippe said. "As a matter of fact, I was after your passport."

Kerry looked at Gaby again. For some reason he was depending on her to confirm or deny whatever Philippe said. "It is true," Gaby said again. "When you began to experience the stomach cramps, he would have offered to take you back to your hotel room. Then he would have offered to get you something from the pharmacy. What he would have given you then would have been a sleeping powder dissolved in a bicarbonate drink. As soon as you went to sleep he would have taken your passport."

"Just my passport?" Kerry asked, challenging Philippe with the fixed stare again.

The Frenchman shrugged. "In your case, yes."

"How much can you sell a stolen passport for these days?" Kerry asked.

"From two thousand to four thousand francs," Philippe said. "Five hundred to one thousand U.S. dollars." He glanced uneasily at Gaby. She gave him an encouraging nod. He started to speak again, then changed his mind and remained silent.

"What's the rest of it?" asked Kerry.

It was Gaby who answered. "Your passport was not being stolen to sell," she said. "We needed it for Philippe himself to use. He must leave Europe as soon as possible. Some men are trying to kill him. There is a price on his life."

During dinner Kerry learned the entire story. Philippe Carrier was an independent thief. He had been a thief all his life. As a boy he became an accomplished shoplifter. In his adolescence he was a car thief. During his twenties he had been a swindler, working the

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Riviera, selling rare gems to tourists, then switching fake stones for the real ones at the close of the transaction. He had been caught at it and had served four years in Poissy prison. Since his release he had changed his modus operandi. He now specialized in stealing from foreign businessmen.

"I work them in the same way I worked you," Philippe explained. "It is very simple, really. I sit in the bar at one of the better hotels. Usually about ninety minutes before the dinner hour is the best time. When a man comes in alone, I listen to him order his drink. Usually I can tell by his accent what nationality he is. I speak six languages, you see, in addition to my native French. I learned German and English while I was in prison. Then, when I began working this game, I took it upon myself to learn others. I studied Italian, Swedish, Spanish, even Japanese. The latter has been highly useful to me since Japan's rise to its present high position in the world's electronics market. There is always an abundance of Japanese businessmen in the city.

"At any rate," Philippe continued, "once I determine the man's nationality it is fairly easy to strike up a conversation with him. Nothing sounds better to a traveling businessman in a foreign country than to hear his own language. Especially over a drink in a friendly bar. I chat with him much as I did with you. I appraise him, decide what type he is. If he appears to have French women on his mind, as so many of them do, I invite him to join me at a special house in Montmartre where I tell him I am a member.

"If he seems interested in making some kind of purchase—gems, watches, paintings—I tell him he is in luck, I have a brother who deals in just that commodity and I can arrange for him to make the purchase at a considerable saving. Or, if the man is your type, Monsieur Kerry, if he does not appear to be the kind who would be interested in buying women or watches or water colors, if he is self-confident like you, then I invite him to dine with my fiancée and me, as I did you. And somewhere along the way I put a laxative in his drink.

"The stomach cramps come on gradually," Philippe went on. "They are not terribly severe, not what you would call really painful—they are just very threatening, very uncomfortable. I usually ask the man what he has eaten for lunch that day. If it is escargots or hare or something out of the ordinary, I say that it was probably spoiled. If he has eaten nothing exotic, then I say there is a mild epidemic of stomach influenza going around Paris."

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"In any event, I tell him not to worry, we will buy the painting or meet the woman or whatever the next night, but for now it is best to get him back to his hotel room. Once I have helped him to his room, in his presence I telephone the pharmacy and ask if they have anything for food poisoning or stomach flu, et cetera. I then go down and get it for him. It is usually a mild effervescent of some kind. When I prepare it for him, I mix in a light sedative powder.

"In fifteen minutes my new friend is sound asleep. And I am at liberty to go through his personal belongings at my leisure in the privacy of his room. I relieve him of his cash, traveler's checks—which, incidentally, are remarkably easy to pass—his watch, rings, any other jewelry, passport and other identification, briefcase, plus any new purchases he has made—gifts for his wife, girl friend, new clothes, that sort of thing. It is very easy and very profitable. I manage to live quite comfortably on two jobs a month."

"And the police?" Kerry asked. "The hotel security?"

Philippe shrugged. "Paris is one of the busiest cities in the world. If one visitor out of five thousand is robbed, it is no big thing. As for the hotels, there are so many I am seldom in the same one twice in the same year. It is a very safe business. My risks are few."

"Then why is someone trying to kill you?" Kerry asked.

Philippe shook his head. "Some very good luck, Monsieur, that turned into very bad luck. A month ago I was at the Hotel George V looking for a mark. An American came in and ordered a drink. To engage him in conversation, I asked if he had the correct time. He told me—exactly seven o'clock. I then said, 'Well, I have some time to kill. May I buy you another drink?' He accepted. We sat together at the bar. To take his attention away from his drink I said, 'See that man at the corner table? That's Marcel Duree, a famous French actor.' When he turned to look, I spiked his drink. The laxative I use is colorless and tasteless. It dissolves instantly"—he gave Kerry a wry smile—"unless, of course, I am careless and sprinkle some of it on the swizzle stick.

"Anyway, about five minutes later the gentleman began to experience stomach cramps. After he complained about them the third time, I offered to help him to his room. He said, 'Fine. We have to go up there anyway.' I was puzzled by the remark but I did not let it deter me. He was staying right there at the George V, on the tenth floor. When we got to his room, before I could offer to call the pharmacy for him, he said, 'The money is there, in the briefcase. Count it so we can make the exchange.'

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"Of course I did not know what he was talking about, but I decided at once to play along. I opened the briefcase and found it filled with neatly bound sheafs of American banknotes—all of one-hundred-dollar denomination. I began to count. As the man watched me he got sicker and sicker. When I had counted to forty thousand dollars I said, 'Let me get you something from the pharmacy.' He shook his head.

" 'No,' he said, 'I want to get this over with. Keep counting.' I got to eighty thousand. By that time he had become most uncomfortable. 'I'm going to be sick,' he said.

" 'Let me at least order you some seltzer water from the bar,' I insisted. 'All right,' he said. 'Anything. Excuse me.' As I picked up the phone and pretended to dial room service, he hurried into the bathroom. 'Hello, room service,' I said, loudly enough for him to hear. I put down the phone and quietly closed the briefcase, all the while edging toward the door. 'Yes, would you send two bottles of seltzer water up to room ten-sixteen, please?' I quickly opened the door, slipped into the hall, stuck my head back in and said, 'Yes, room ten-sixteen, and rush the order, please.' Then I eased the door shut and ran. I took the stairs down all ten flights and was out of the hotel in ninety seconds."

"With how much?" Kerry asked.

"A quarter million."

Kerry pursed his lips in a silent whistle. "What kind of transaction do you think it was? Narcotics?"

Philippe shrugged. "Whatever it was, his contact obviously was to approach him in the George V bar and ask for the time. The contact was late and I happened along. It was a freak occurrence."

"From your story," Kerry said, "it would seem that you got away clean. How is it that there's a price on your life?"

Philippe shook his head wryly. "The courier's employer was a large smuggling syndicate. They found out who I am through the Paris underworld. You see, I deal with several fences and money-changers. For a price, one of them apparently revealed my name. Now one hundred thousand dollars has been offered to whoever either finds me and gives me to them, or kills me. Every cheap gunman in the city is looking for me. As well as every pickpocket, burglar, forger—what have you." He grunted loudly. "I, who have sold passports to the underworld in Paris for over five years, cannot even buy one for myself, for fear the contact will turn me in."

"Pity," said Kerry. "With all that money, too." He sipped his coffee,

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which he had watched very closely since the waiter had poured it. "However, with your expertise I'm sure you'll be able to steal a passport. My catching you tonight was merely bad luck on your part."

Gaby reached over and touched Kerry's arm. "I am afraid it is not that simple. Just any passport will not do. It must be someone who at least resembles Philippe—same height, weight, same color hair and eyes, same shape face. With all that money, he does not want to take the chance of using an altered document."

"I grew this beard," Philippe said, "to help me get past the immigration inspectors. And I can change my hair style very easily. But everything else on the passport must be the same. Gaby has been watching the hotels for a month looking for someone suitable. You are the first one who even comes close."

"I saw you earlier this evening in the hotel gift shop," Gaby said. "I followed you to the bar. Then I phoned Philippe." She glanced down to avoid his eyes. "You were looking at ladies' watches in the gift shop. Were you going to buy something for your wife?"

Kerry waited until she met his gaze again. "I have no wife," he said. He studied her for a moment, deep in thought. Then he said, "What will you do for a passport? Use your own?"

"Eventually, yes. But I will not be going with Philippe. Not right now."

"It is too risky," Philippe said vaguely. "I will send for her later."

"Yes," said Gaby, "he will send for me later." There was a sharpness to her voice which told Kerry immediately that this was a subject over which they had argued. Kerry glanced at Philippe in time to see the line of his mouth tighten. He looked back at Gaby.

"Will you excuse us for a moment, Gaby?" he asked, addressing her by name for the first time. "I would like to discuss something privately with Philippe."

They were both surprised, and exchanged quick, suspicious looks; but Philippe saw no jeopardy in the request and nodded to Gaby. "Go ahead. Go to the powder room."

Gaby shrugged her marvelous shoulders and left the table. Kerry watched her longlegged stride all the way across the room. And Philippe watched Kerry curiously.

"Lovely, is she not?" Philippe asked.

Kerry fixed him in a flat inimical gaze. "Do you really intend to send for her?" he asked. "Or are you just using her to help you get away?"

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Philippe smiled knowingly. "What is on your mind, monsieur?"

"Suppose I offered to sell you my passport? Would you be interested?"

"Sell?" asked Philippe. "Or trade? For Gaby?"

"I don't have to trade for Gaby, because I think we both know you aren't going to send for her. I think if I sell you my passport, I'll get Gaby free in the deal when you leave her behind."

Philippe continued to smile, but his eyes hardened slightly. "How much do you want for your passport?"

"Fifty thousand."

"You are crazy," Philippe said, his mouth dropping open. "That is twenty times what a passport is worth."

"Not to you. Not *my* passport. I look like you, remember?" Kerry sat back and sneered slightly. "I'm really surprised that you're so cheap. After all, fifty thousand is only one-fifth of what you stole."

"It is still a ridiculous price for me to pay for something that you can replace simply by filling out a few forms at the Canadian Embassy."

"Suit yourself." Kerry rose to leave. "Thank you for the dinner. Good night."

"All right," Philippe said quickly, raising his hands in defeat. "All right, you win. I am in no position to hold out, as you well know. Fifty thousand it is."

Kerry remained standing. "Good. There is a condition. I don't want to deal directly with you—it's too dangerous. So I'll deal with Gaby. Have her meet me on the bridge near the Hilton—what's it called?"

"The one in front of the Eiffel Tower? Pont D'Iena."

"Yes. Have her meet me there at noon tomorrow. She and I will work out the details."

Kerry left the restaurant before Gaby returned to the table.

The Pont D'Iena is a short broad bridge that crosses the Seine just as it turns in front of the Eiffel Tower. The bridge is usually populated by North African street vendors selling souvenirs, but it is also a very good avenue on which to walk away and look back at the great tower. Gaby was waiting in the center, standing at the rail and looking at the water below, when Kerry walked up.

"It looks cold," he said.

"That is because it is so dark," she told him. "The water of the Seine is always dark."

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They started to walk along New York Avenue on the Right Bank, going nowhere in particular. Kerry wanted to take Gaby's arm but did not.

"Why did you offer to sell Philippe your passport?" Gaby asked.

Kerry shrugged. "The money perhaps."

"Any other reason?"

"Perhaps."

She stopped and faced him. "I will be going too, you understand. He will send for me."

"Of course. Until he does, however, you may need a friend. I would like to apply for the position."

"I am not sure I need you for a friend," she said. "I do not know you."

"I can furnish references," he told her.

"Oh? From whom?"

"Whomever you wish. The President of France. The Prime Minister of England. Marlon Brando. I know them all."

She laughed. "I will think it over," she said.

They went to a café for pastry and coffee. "Why did you want to deal with me instead of Philippe?" she asked.

"I don't trust Philippe. I do trust you."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Have dinner with me tonight."

"I cannot. I must return to Philippe."

"Will you dine with me after he is gone?"

"Perhaps. When will you sell him the passport?"

"When can you bring the money?"

"Any time. Today. Tonight."

"Tomorrow. Meet me at the same place, at the same time. We can have lunch."

"All right."

The following day she was carrying a large purse and Kerry knew she had the money with her. They walked to a restaurant on the Avenue Victor Hugo and had sole and chestnuts. "Did you bring the passport?" she asked.

"No, I'm sorry. I forgot it."

"What kind of game are you playing?" she asked quickly.

"No game. It's just that I want to continue seeing you, and I'm afraid that after you get the passport you will disappear."

"Look," she said, "you are very nice and I am flattered that you like me. But you must understand that I intend to stay with Phi-

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lippe. After he leaves I will not be here long at all."

"For the time that you are here, will you agree to see me?" Kerry asked. "Just to dine, to go for walks. Nothing more. Unless, of course, you find yourself attracted to me and—well, it will be up to you. If you just promise to see me, I'll go through with the deal."

Gaby thought it over. "All right," she said after a few moments. "I promise to see you."

The next day she came to his hotel room and delivered the $50,000. She sat on the bed, crosslegged, in her suede jeans and ankle boots, her splendid shoulders and breasts outlined perfectly under a turtleneck. Kerry sat at the writing desk and checked the money, taking his time so that he could watch her in the mirror.

• "Would you like something to eat?" he asked. "I can call room service."

"No, I am not hungry, thank you."

"I have some chocolates from the little shop on the rue Saint-Dominique. In the bedtable drawer there if you'd like some."

She smiled. "I cannot say no to that." She opened the drawer. His Walther automatic and extra magazines were next to the candy. She looked at him, frowning.

"Why do you have a gun?"

"For protection," Kerry said.

"Philippe has never owned a gun in all the time I have known him."

"Good for Philippe."

"Philippe says that a man who has a gun will use a gun."

"Is that what Philippe says? I'm sorry you saw the gun. I thought it was in the other drawer. Help yourself to the chocolates."

"I don't want any now."

Kerry finished counting the money and gave her the passport. She put it in her purse without examining it.

"You will not report this stolen until Philippe is out of the country, of course," she said. "So they will not be watching for it at the airport."

"I won't report it missing as long as you keep your promise," Kerry said. "I want to continue seeing you. Every day. At noon on the Pont D'Iena."

"I will keep my bargain," she said, and left.

Gaby met him every day as promised. Sometimes they just walked. Along the Seine, when it was not too breezy; down the protected rue

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De Rivoli when it was. Usually they had lunch somewhere—odd little lunches of pastry and champagne, or great multicourse affairs that took them three hours to finish. Sometimes they window-shopped. Once she let him buy her a watch, after much coaxing. "In case you do go away and I never see you again," he said. "At least I'll know you have something I gave you. Besides, I'm buying it with Philippe's money."

She became more comfortable with him, and began to smile, even laugh, during their time together. Once, walking in the Jardin Des Tuileries, the great garden in front of the Louvre, she even held his hand. For several days they avoided discussing Philippe. Then one afternoon, coming out of a theater where they had sought shelter from a cloudy cold day, she said, "Philippe will be leaving the day after tomorrow. He is flying to the United States. He says he will send for me in one week."

"You said the night we met that you would be traveling on your own passport. Is that still your plan?" Kerry asked.

"Of course."

"Did Philippe tell you to get a visa from the American Embassy?"

"No. He did not have to get a visa."

"He's using a Canadian passport. Canada and the U.S. have an open border. Your passport, I presume, is French. You will require a visa. I'm surprised Philippe didn't tell you."

"He probably forgot," Gaby said quietly. She thought for a moment, then brightened. "I know he is going to send for me because he is letting me buy new clothes and new luggage."

"I wonder," Kerry said, "why he doesn't leave half of the money with you? That way, if Customs finds his half on him and impounds it, there's still a chance of you getting your half through. I wonder if he's thought of that?"

"I am sure he has," Gaby said with a distinct coolness. "But Philippe likes to handle all the money himself."

"I'm sure he does."

She glared at him. "Are you trying to make me unhappy, Jack?"

"No."

"I trust Philippe."

"Wonderful."

She sighed irritably and looked at her watch, the one he had bought her. "I have to go now. I have something to do."

Kerry nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow. On the bridge."

The next day had been the day when it suddenly turned unsea-

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sonably warm and they had sat outside at the café on the Avenue Franklin Roosevelt. When she had become quite angry and walked away from him. And he had taken the wine glass with her lip print on it and touched it to his own lips . . .

Kerry did not go back to the bridge for three days. On the fourth day she came to his room.

"Philippe is dead," she told him. "Some men kidnaped him from the London airport where he was changing planes. He was shot to death and his body thrown in a ditch. The newspaper story says that the authorities believe the killing was done by a group called the IGF—"

"Yes, that's the Irish Guerrilla Force. They're Northern Irish outlaws."

"The body has been identified as that of John J. Kerry, a notorious assassin for the Irish Revolutionary Army."

He raised his eyebrows. "Is that what they called me? A 'notorious assassin'?" He locked eyes with her. "In some quarters I'm considered a hero," he pointed out.

"You knew it would happen."

"I thought there was a good chance of it, yes. The IGF has informers all over the British airports." Kerry sat down on the bed, where he had half a dozen passports spread out. He picked one up. "I've decided to start a new life. I'm going to become Michael Faulkner of South Africa. Do you like that name?"

"I know now why you were so certain that Philippe would not send for me," she accused.

Kerry shook his head. "That wasn't the reason. He never intended sending for you. He didn't even tell you where he was going. It isn't necessary to change planes in London to go to the United States. Most likely he was on his way to one of the South American countries. How much money did he leave you?"

"Four thousand francs."

Kerry grunted softly. "One thousand dollars. Out of *two hundred* thousand that he had left. Certainly can't accuse him of being overgenerous, can you?"

Gaby walked to the window and looked out at a bleak rainy day. Presently she sighed—a deep weary sigh. "So Philippe is gone," she said, almost to herself.

"In more ways than one," Kerry remarked.

Gaby continued to stare out the window for several moments.

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Then she forced a half smile. "Do you still have the chocolates?" she asked.

"Yes." He nodded toward the bedtable. "Same drawer."

Gaby opened the drawer again. She looked at the gun. Next to it were the chocolates and the money Philippe had paid for the passport. Gaby stared at the chocolates and the money and the gun.

For the first time she realized that she no longer needed Philippe. She smiled to herself.

And if she did not need Philippe, she certainly did not need Kerry. She reached past the chocolates and picked up the gun.

Classified Continued

(from page 162)

MONEYMAKING OPPORTUNITIES—Cont'd

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a *NEW* detective story by

R. L. STEVENS

It will be discovered in 1983 and will be called the biological death date. Every person will know his or her year of demise. Of course, such knowledge will affect everyone's activities, plans, relationships—the fabric of all lives will be woven out of DDD—Death Date Disclosure. In the detection of crime, DDD will create a new kind of clue . . .

DEDUCTION, 1996

by R. L. STEVENS

You didn't need to check your home computer to know that the presidential primary campaign of 1996 was shaping up as a real dogfight. But the roots of one important issue went back 12 years to the summer of 1983, when the most important discovery in the history of human biology occurred almost by chance in the research laboratory of a British university. I was a young reporter at the time, and I wrote one of the first wire-service stories on the biological death date.

It was, simply stated, the discovery that the time of each person's death from natural causes was built into the body, and that this death date could be determined with an extremely high degree of accuracy. The news was first transmitted through the pages of a learned journal of biological research. "It is certain," the author wrote, "that within a few years a simple test, performed in a physician's office shortly after the age of puberty, can determine a person's life expectancy with an accuracy of plus or minus six months."

Suddenly we all knew the year in which we would die.

At first people treated it as a fad, especially teenagers for whom the ultimate date was so far off as to be almost meaningless. They

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took to sporting buttons on their jeans or T-shirts, with glowing numbers proclaiming the year of their demise: *2028,* or *2043,* or *2051.* Occasionally you'd see some without buttons and immediately wonder if fate had given them a date that was too close for comfort.

Of course people continued to die in accidents, and they continued to kill each other. But oddly enough the suicide rate showed a marked decline for a time. The knowledge that one had only a few more months to live, or the converse knowledge that years remained, seemed to stay the suicide's hand. It was not for several years that the bizarre custom of New Year's suicides was to come into vogue.

Among older people the desire to flaunt one's year of death was far less noticeable. Like a person's age it became a highly personal matter, to be revealed only to close relatives and business associates. Before long, however, a cry arose in the media for something that came to be known as DDD—Death Date Disclosure. Middle-aged politicians aspiring to higher office were special targets of the press, which trumpeted the public's right to know. It was during the Christmas holiday season preceding the last presidential election of the century that the situation came to a head.

Though the election of 1996 was almost a year away, some elements of the press and public were already pushing the candidacy of William G. Hallendar, two-time governor of Illinois and a definite front-runner. I'd been assigned by my paper to follow him around the country during those fading days of '95, reporting on every speech and impromptu remark. He was a good man and I liked the assignment.

But in most cities Bill Hallendar visited, the first question from the local press was the same: "What's your stand on DDD?"

Hallendar would flash his famous smile and reply, "For me or for you?"

"There's a bill before the Congress to require all presidential candidates to make Death Date Disclosure, the same as they make financial disclosures."

"I'm familiar with the pending legislation. If it passes, I will naturally comply with the law."

"And if it doesn't pass?"

"That question is premature. Come on, let's get onto other topics. Doesn't anyone want to ask me about my stand on foreign policy?"

And that was the way it usually went. After the first few times I didn't even bother to tape the exchanges, and perhaps it was this indifference on my part which led Hallendar to really notice me for

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the first time. "You're the fellow from the *Post,* aren't you?"

"That's right."

"You've stopped taping me. Getting bored already?"

We were on the plane to San Francisco, having just taken off from L.A., and it seemed like a perfect opportunity to get an exclusive statement from him. "Not bored, no. Just wondering how long you can stonewall it the way you've been doing."

His face flushed with a passing anger that quickly came under control. He hadn't achieved the ranking of a presidential contender by losing his temper in front of reporters. "I don't call it stonewalling," he answered calmly. "That's a word that's twenty years out of date anyhow. I have said repeatedly that I would comply with any laws about disclosure."

"You can understand the feeling of the voters. They don't want to elect a man who might not live out his term."

"A great many of our finest presidents failed to live out their terms. Assassination is always a threat."

"And a threat that cannot be foreseen. But the biological life span is a medical fact, and as such is part of your medical record. In the past, candidates for president have always revealed the results of medical checkups. DDD is just as important to the voters as an unreported illness would be."

Bill Hallendar sighed and leaned forward in his seat. It was the practised gesture of a man trying to be both sincere and frank. "Look here, I admire your reporting for the *Post*—always have. But the media is giving me a bum rap on this. Science has only known about the biological death date for something like twelve years. That's hardly enough time to say that it's an undisputed fact with no possibility of considerable error. Disease is still a problem, people still drink and smoke too much, industrial pollution is still a hazard in some areas of the country. My point is that a death date determined at puberty could be wrong. We just don't have enough statistics to form a solid judgment."

Statistics were one thing I knew backward and forward. "In those twelve years the governments of twenty-three nations have kept records on a total of 1,567,344 of their citizens who were tested for their biological life spans and later died. Not one of those people—*not one*—outlived their biological death date by more than six months! About ten percent died more than six months early, mainly as the result of accident or other violence. Only two percent died early natural deaths, apparently caused by their mode of living."

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"You know all the figures, don't you?" he asked, a little sarcastically.

Before I could reply we were joined by Hallendar's wife, the beautiful Margo. Some said she was both his greatest asset and his biggest liability, but one often heard such talk about beautiful women. At 27 she was exactly 30 years younger than Bill Hallendar, an age difference many viewed with suspicion. But they'd had five good years of marriage since the death of his first wife, and that had quelled the gossips to some extent. Margo Hallendar still moved in her own world, a raven-haired former model who had friends among the show business greats on both coasts. But she'd seemed content to settle down in Illinois with Bill during his terms as governor, and if it was her need for wider horizons that drove him now, it was a drive he didn't seem to mind in the least.

"Are you bothering my husband again?" she asked with a smile.

"Just trying to get a story."

"Bill, there's a *Time* magazine cover story coming in over the Xeroprinter. You might want to see it."

"Oh?"

"They've chosen you and Marc Rathford as joint Men of the Year."

He thought about that. "Well, I'd have preferred having the honor alone," he commented. Then, as if remembering there was a reporter present, he added, "but Rathford is a fine Senator. I'd better read it so I'll be ready for the press at the next stop."

Alone with Margo Hallendar for a few moments I squandered several seconds simply bathing in her beauty. She was used to it, and smiled at my obvious infatuation. "You really shouldn't keep after Bill about the DDD. It's not fair, you know."

"Why not?" I'd recovered my middle-aged wits enough to act the journalist again. "The President revealed he has another ten years to live, and the other candidates have made their disclosures. Your husband should do the same. His silence only implies he knows he can't live out a four-year term."

"It implies rather that he's a sensible man who believes a preoccupation with death dates is turning this country away from real progress on the important issues!"

"You love him a great deal, don't you?" I asked.

"I wouldn't have married him if I didn't. I certainly had no idea five years ago that he'd be running for president."

"He wasn't even governor then, was he?"

She shook her head. "Glenda had just died of a heart attack and

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I was there to comfort him. He was already running for governor, and a few months later he was elected to his first term."

I had a sudden thought. "Would both of you come to a party with me in San Francisco? A New Year's Eve party?"

She eyed me with a trace of suspicion, weighing the invitation. "I'm afraid not. We only have two days in the city. But thank you for asking."

When the plane landed at San Francisco there was a small crowd of demonstrators on hand to greet Hallendar. They were mostly young people, wearing their death-date buttons and waving signs emblazoned with *DDD* and *Disclosure Now!* He gave them a wave and smile as he helped Margo into a waiting taxicopter for the short hop downtown. I still liked the man, for all his evasion of DDD, and it was reflected in the story I wrote that night.

I went to the party alone on New Year's Eve, nodding occasionally to someone I knew as I moved through a crowded living room to the makeshift bar at one end. We all knew it was a death-date party, of course, although no one mentioned that fact. I'd wanted Hallendar to see one, but Margo had guessed my motive when she declined.

"Do you know them?" someone asked me as I edged my way closer to the host and hostess, an aging couple who were holding court in one corner of the room.

"No," I admitted. "I was invited by a friend."

I was promptly introduced to Norman and Celia Reynolds. He shook my hand with the vigor of a much younger man and invited me to sit down. "Are you going to write about this?" he asked.

"Not unless you want me to."

He shrugged. "It's your decision."

"I assume 1996 is your year?"

His wife nodded. "For both of us. That's what brought us together ten years ago. It was my second marriage and Norman's third. We decided to spend the remaining years of our lives with each other, and to go out together."

"You could wait for it to happen," I suggested.

Norman shook his head. "Celia is already quite ill, and I feel the stirrings of mortality myself. This is our year, there's no denying it."

"I spoke with someone recently who doesn't believe the concept of the biological life span has been proved."

"Oh, there are always doubters," Norman said. "But we are not among them."

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"When will you . . .?"

"Midnight, or shortly after. It's such a good party we won't want it to end too soon."

I nodded, understanding. They were clinging to their final hours of life just as anyone would. I'd seen the same look on the faces of murderers awaiting execution, in the days of capital punishment. "You two have always been open about your death date," I said. "Why do you think someone would keep it a secret?"

"Older people don't like to tell," Norman said. "We have friends who've refused to even take the test. They don't want to know their date, even now!"

"They think ignorance is bliss," his wife said, "but of course it isn't."

I left the party soon after that, before midnight. I didn't feel close enough to Norman and Celia to share their final moments. That *night I didn't feel close enough to anyone.*

Ten days into the new year, the election year, Bill Hallendar announced that he would comply with DDD, even though the actual law had not yet been passed by Congress. He called a news conference in Washington and distributed copies of the report from his personal physician.

His death date was 2011.

"So you see, ladies and gentlemen, I still have fifteen years ahead of me—more than enough for even a two-term presidency."

We had plenty of questions when he'd finished his opening statement. Mainly we wanted to know why he'd been so reluctant to reveal this information earlier. But he simply stood with Margo at his side and repeated all the reasons he'd given earlier. He hadn't believed in the proved certainty of the biological death date—still didn't believe in it, for that matter—but he'd bowed to the wishes of press and public. He'd made his DDD, along with the other candidates.

But I wasn't satisfied.

I sat at my typewriter for an hour, trying to compose a story about it, but nothing came.

2011.

If he wasn't going to die until 2011, why had he tried so hard to keep it a secret?

Was it possible that a doctor had supplied Hallendar with a false death date? I'd never heard of anything like that happening, but it

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was worth checking out. I glanced at the name on the top of the Xeroxed medical report. *Dr. Wendell Norge.*

Later that afternoon I was in Dr. Norge's office. He was a tall distinguished man with glasses and thinning gray hair—exactly the type a presidential candidate would choose for his personal physician. "I expected to hear from the press sooner or later," he said, "but there's really nothing I can add to the report as it was released."

"What technique do you use for determining the biological death date in a human being, Dr. Norge?"

"There's only one accepted method, as you must know. Radiodiagnosis of a tissue culture taken from a primary sex characteristic."

"And your test showed Hallendar's date of death to be 2011?"

Dr. Norge sighed. "My report states that William Hallendar's test shows his body and mind will cease to function sometime in the year 2011, with the usual six-month margin of error."

"There's a date on your report—just last week."

"Correct."

"You hadn't examined Hallendar earlier?"

"He's been a patient of mine for a year or so, but I'd never tested him for biological life span before."

"I thought that was part of a routine physical exam these days."

"Most patients request it. He did not. I understood he'd had one done several years back."

"What was the result of it?"

"He didn't say, and I didn't ask. Some people prefer to keep that information private."

"And yet last week he requested you to run the test."

"Correct."

"And released the results to the press."

"That's right. You have a copy of it in your hand."

I had a sudden thought. "What about his wife, Margo? Did you check her for biological death date as well?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. Husbands and wives often have it done together."

"What was her date?"

He smiled indulgently. "Of course I couldn't reveal that without her permission. But I can tell you she'll outlive her husband by a good many years."

As I was about to leave I came up with a final question. "Who was his doctor before you? Is there any record?"

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Norge flipped over the microfiche and inserted it into the viewer. "Back in Illinois. Man named Stratham in Chicago. I'll give you his address."

"Thanks, Doctor. If I get a story out of this I'll make sure I spell your name right."

"Don't bother."

If Wendell Norge's office had been the sort to conjure up visions of medical progress and hefty bills, the tiny walkup office of Dr. Stratham recalled the days of country physicians and bartering for services. Only the sound of passing traffic reminded me that this was, after all, still a suburb of Chicago.

Dr. Stratham peered at me over the top of his half-moon glasses and said, "Digging out old records might be difficult. We had a robbery here a few months back." His hands trembled a bit as he spoke.

"A robbery? What sort?"

"Oh, people looking for drugs, I suppose. I didn't worry much about it." I wondered if he might be on drugs himself.

"People looking for drugs don't take old records," I pointed out. "Didn't you have them on computer reels or microfiche?"

Dr. Stratham puffed on his pipe. "You see any gadgets like that in this here office? I got my files in drawers, like sensible people, so's I can read them when I want to."

"And they were stolen?"

"Some of them, yes. The whole first part of the alphabet—A through H." He trembled again, a man old beyond his moderate years.

I cursed softly. "These included files on former patients as well?"

"Sure, I suppose so. I don't get around to cleaning out the files as often as I should."

"Do you remember when William Hallendar was a patient?"

Dr. Stratham nodded. "That was years ago, before he became governor. When his first wife was alive." Something flickered in his eyes.

"Did you perform a biological death-date examination on him?"

"I might have. Everyone wanted them, after the first burst of publicity."

"But you'd have no record of the result?"

"Hallendar. No, that would have been in the stolen records."

"I see."

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I was beginning to see all too well. Bill Hallendar had something to hide, all right, but what was it? What was so important that he'd have his old medical records stolen from a doctor's office? But then I caught myself. It could have been someone like me who stole the records—a reporter looking for a story on Hallendar's death date. Maybe Hallendar heard about the robbery and that impelled him to make his DDD.

Maybe, but I didn't buy it. A reporter would have rushed into print with the story, not sat on it for months. Besides, a few months ago, at the time of the robbery, only Hallendar could have foreseen how important to his campaign the death date might become.

I glanced around Dr. Stratham's office once more. "Where's your radiodiagnosis equipment, Doctor?"

"Don't have any," he replied.

"Oh? Then how do you perform your biological death-date tests?"

"I take the tissue samples and send them to a lab, same as a lot of other doctors. Can't tie up hundreds of thousands of dollars in fancy equipment."

There was hope for me yet. "The lab would keep a record of all the tests they performed for you, wouldn't they?"

"I suppose so."

"Could I have their name and address?"

An hour later I was across town, calling on the offices of 21st Century Testing. They told me they could release no test results without the approval of the physician involved, and that sent me back to Dr. Stratham by telephone. He grumbled a bit but finally agreed. "Hallendar's not my patient any longer, and besides, according to the papers he already released the information. Don't know what you're wasting your time for."

"Just tell them here that they can release the information."

He did, and they did. After waiting another ten minutes a white-coated lab technician brought me a single-line computer printout:

Hallendar, William G. bio d d 2011 (gemini)

2011.

The same date he'd just released.

Then why had he kept it secret? Why had he arranged to have the records stolen, if indeed he had?

I started to turn away, disappointed that my crosscountry quest had ended like this. Then I asked, "What does gemini mean?"

The technician glanced at the printout in my hand. "That's our code word for a double death date. It means that Mr. Hallendar and

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his wife were both tested, and their biological death dates were the same. It happens occasionally, and the couple is usually quite pleased to learn it."

"I know," I said, remembering Norman and Celia Reynolds in San Francisco.

I decided it was time I went back to Washington. I'd learned what I'd come to learn, and more besides. I'd learned enough to destroy the career of William G. Hallendar.

He faced me across the great oak desk in his Washington campaign headquarters.

"I assumed my DDD release would have satisfied you fellows. What is it now?"

I slid the computer printout across the desk for him to read. "I just got back from Chicago. I visited Dr. Stratham."

His face went white. "What does this mean?"

"Your first wife died of heart failure five years ago—a full twenty years before her death date. Heart disease is one of the most easily detected elements of the biological life span. You kept your own death date a secret—and finally had it determined by another physician—because you didn't want it revealed that the original tests gave you and your first wife the same death date. She wasn't supposed to die when she did, and that means her death five years ago was unnatural."

"Are you accusing me—"

"You've accused yourself. You tried to hide your death date by every means possible, including the stealing of records from your former doctor. But it was your first wife's date that really needed to be hidden. I think you killed her, Hallendar, so you could marry Margo. A divorce wouldn't sit well at the beginning of a political career, especially if your wife proved uncooperative. But there are plenty of poisons that can mimic a heart attack."

"I didn't kill her," he said through dry lips.

"Then who did? She didn't die of a heart attack, and you're the one who covered it up."

"I covered it up, yes—because it was a nasty story and I didn't want it dragged through the papers just at the time I was running for governor."

"I don't believe you," I said bluntly. "You're telling me someone else murdered your wife and you didn't want it dragged through the papers?"

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Hallendar pressed a button on his digital watch. "I can't discuss it any more now. Margo and I are catching a plane for New Hampshire in less than an hour.

"I'm writing the story, Hallendar. I have to write it."

He left me alone in the office and didn't return. After a few minutes I decided to leave. It was already dark outside and I had a deadline to meet.

At the door I met Margo Hallendar. "Don't leave quite yet," she said. "I want to speak with you."

"I thought you and your husband had a plane to catch."

"We do. There's a helicopter waiting on the roof to take us to Dulles Airport."

"Then go."

"He said you're going to write a story about his first wife's death."

"Yes. It seems she died twenty years too soon."

"I know that. He told me all about it."

"Did he also tell you about getting someone to steal the records from Dr. Stratham's Chicago office?"

She smiled sadly and shook her head. "No, no, that's not the way it was. You don't understand anything, do you?"

"Suppose you tell me about it, then."

"Glenda was having an affair with another man. Yes, an affair—even though she was forty-six years old and her husband was running for governor. She knew Bill would never give her a divorce at that stage of his career." Margo fell silent for a moment, as if gathering her strength. "So she and her lover planned some sort of crazy murder-suicide pact. He killed her, and then couldn't go through with the rest of it. Glenda Hallendar died, and the man who killed her went on living."

"And it was passed off as heart failure?"

"You were right about the poison. Bill told me you'd guessed that much."

Something was wrong here. "But Stratham was their family doctor. He knew their death date. He must have realized that Glenda Hallendar's death wasn't a natural one."

"You still don't see it, do you? Dr. Stratham was Glenda's lover. It was Dr. Stratham who killed her."

I sat there staring at her. "And Hallendar never brought him to justice?"

"How could he, without dragging it through the papers? Glenda

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had, in a sense, chosen that death for herself. And Stratham has the memory of it to live with. If you've seen him you know what it has done to him."

"And the robbery of his files?"

"Never took place. He couldn't have you digging into them, so he invented the robbery."

"I see."

"Will you write your story now?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Why?" She leaned forward, staring into my eyes. "Because my husband is a decent man who wants to do something for his country. He wants to get the United States started again, to build hope in this country so that people will think of other reasons for New Year's Eve parties besides committing suicide. You were a supporter of his once, weren't you?"

"I wrote some favorable columns."

"Then give the man a chance! Maybe he can get our young people wearing buttons announcing something beside their death date. Thirty years ago they wore a button that said *Make love, not war,* and that read a hell of a lot better than one that says *2042.*"

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Nothing. Sometimes doing nothing is the hardest thing of all. Bill found that out when Glenda died."

Then she was gone.

I sat there alone for a few minutes, staring at the stacks of campaign literature piled on the desk. William Hallendar had made his disclosure, and tonight Margo had made hers. Now it was my turn, but I decided my disclosure could wait a while, maybe forever.

There was a roar from up above, and I looked out the window to see a single bright light curving away from the building, across the night sky. It was the running light of their copter, heading for the airport, but to me it looked something like a star.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

THEODORE MATHIESON

We know the name of the first murderer in what was to become the United States of America—the fact is duly recorded in history. We also know the name of the first victim. History tells us little more except that the murderer was hanged for his crime. Mr. Mathieson has undertaken to shed some fictional "light" on that inevitable event . . .

THE FIRST COLONIAL MURDER

by THEODORE MATHIESON

During the terrible ordeal of our first winter at Plymouth, when over one-half of our little band of colonists, over 50 people, young and old, died of malnourishment and exposure, and I, myself, apprentice to Mr. Winslow, the printer, lay for days in high fever and for weeks in recuperation—during this time, the people said, the Devil had so manipulated my brain that ever afterwards I was obsessed with writing a history of the colony.

I began it during my long convalescence, when Mr. Winslow, who had lost his wife and child with the sickness, and had tended me as if I were his own son, permitted me the luxury of making notes of our voyage and settlement, and promised that one day he would print my account of it, if I would try to mend the sooner. Which I promised to do, as I was eager to make the record. Having read Hakluyt's *Voyages* while still in England, it was my ambition to produce a narration as thrilling and important to history as his, and although I knew how necessary my physical contribution was to the well-being of the colony, I was prepared to malinger, if that were

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necessary, in order to make a substantial start upon my project.

And for this selfishness, as I then supposed, the Devil was guiding my fingers as I wrote, for I at once discovered my absorption in *first happenings*. They seemed important—indeed, the very heart of history itself! And so I wrote in detail of the first death at sea—of the servant of Dr. Butten; of the first birth on shipboard—of a boy, fittingly named Oceanus; of the first suicide—of Mr. Bradford's wife.

But when Mr. Winslow read my writings he said, "My dear boy, you seem confused. History is not composed of a recitation of first events only. One must have the capacity, through the grace of God, to sort the important detail from the unimportant, and to assess the values of cause and effect. Perhaps you are not sufficiently recovered to write, but you look healthy enough now to undertake some task in the sun."

And so I was set to work with an axe, sharpening the tops of stakes for the palisade which would soon surround the colony, for although some of the Indians had been friendly, there were others who would attack in the dark of the night.

Working beside me was a man named John Billington, a hired man who had been attached to the Prunty family, all three members of which had died during the winter. He was a contentious and foul-mouthed fellow whom all shunned like the plague. On shipboard during the crossing, Billington had attacked an older man during an argument, mightily striking and bruising him, so that as punishment the captain had Billington's hands and feet tied together and sat him in the bow of the ship for a whole day in order to exorcise the Devil that was in him.

Working beside Billington now, it wasn't long before I said something to displease him, and he seized a sharpened stake and I do believe would have run me through with it if the farmer, Newcomen, who worked nearby, had not stepped up and felled him with a stake of his own.

When I tried to express my appreciation to Newcomen for his intervention on my behalf, he waved me away and subsequently seemed to take little notice of me, so that I was persuaded to think that he had felled Billington not so much for my protection as for his own satisfaction.

Be that as it may, from that moment on, and for years thereafter, there was bad blood between Newcomen and Billington, and although Billington dared not attack the farmer outright, for the

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latter weighed fourteen stone and was heavily muscled from working in the fields, he always argued against him at the meeting house, and harassed him otherwise with petty vandalisms and thefts, although nothing could be proved against him.

Meanwhile, I avoided Billington thereafter, and was pleased to find that he took no notice of me.

In fact, not many of the colony did; for I never seemed to have the gift of making friends, and none found time to speak with me, besides Mr. Winslow, except to exchange the time of day. And even Mr. Winslow, in time, although I worked diligently for him, repairing books and oiling his printing press and doing a hundred more vigorous tasks in the field, began to give me less and less attention until one day, after his second marriage to Widow White, he told me I must shift for myself.

I began to work for those who would feed me, for I had neither the physique nor aptitude for hard labour, and was too prone to wish to retire with my pen and journal to some private place to write my history, which brought me a wide censure for laziness.

Meanwhile, I was not convinced by Mr. Winslow's dictum that history was aught than first events, and believing that those who were first in anything were, in their own way, heroes of the past as well as significant signposts for the historian, I continued to record the details of such events as the first wedding ceremony in Plymouth—between my former master and Widow White; and the first election of a governor, John Carver. And when John Carver died in office within the year, I recorded that, too, for it was the first death of a duly elected official.

As the years passed, I continued to live from hand to mouth, so to speak, working for this family and that, while I continued to note first events, from the arrival of the first cattle from England to the establishment of Duxbury, the first village outside Plymouth Colony. I began, in truth, to develop a faculty for *predicting* first events, learning to read their foreshadowings, and waiting in anticipation until they would arrive so that I could record them.

Such was the case with Billington and Newcomen, for their feud had become chronic over the years, and I had long recognised the fact that one day, unless there would arise some unpredictable hap to prevent it, I would be faced with the duty of recording the first murder in our colony.

Then one day I found myself in a position, not only to predict that murder, but motivated to abet it.

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For I was now, after ten years of colony life, employed by John Newcomen, who although he gave me as little consideration as ever, had condescended to engage me as a servant, in which capacity I was sent one day into the woods to gather young fiddlehead fern to store against the winter.

Kneeling in the grass some distance from the colony, I heard voices approaching which I thought I recognised, and wishing to determine if I were correct, and not wishing to disclose myself lest I be judged a spy, I hid myself in some adjacent shrubbery. Then I saw Newcomen's daughter, Patience, a handsome young woman of 16, walking hand in hand with John Billington!

His coarseness, for once, seemed held in abeyance—his words, oath-free, were dulcet and solicitous. Over the years he had prospered and was now the owner of his own farm, and, indeed, the years had been kind to him in spite of his intemperate nature, although he was at least 40.

The pair had stopped speaking, and standing scarcely a rod from where I lay, they embraced with an ardour that was like acid to my soul, for I myself had been captivated by the charm of Newcomen's daughter. Although I was but a servant in her eyes, and one not likely ever to own a farm, she had always time to speak with me, and would even listen, at times, when I read a selection from my history. Her association with Billington, which they were clearly keeping secret from the colony, came as an appalling surprise, and it was all I could do to restrain myself from leaping out of my concealment and parting them.

I waited until they had walked on through the forest, and then ran back to Newcomen's house where I secluded myself in the little lean-to in the back where I lived alone; and there I walked the floor the night through, thinking thoughts I'd never thought before, and in the morning I sat down at my table and began writing a message, careful to disguise my hand that one might not recognise it.

The next day, being Sunday, nobody worked and we all went to church. In the afternoon Mr. Newcomen took his customary walk over the fields, I carrying his gun, for he rarely went there without it. Upon his plow he found the note where I had left it. I saw his face turn pale with wrath as he read it, and when he swung upon his heel and headed back to the house, I followed him. So great was his anger, that when he seized the black whip that hung coiled upon a nail in the barn and cracked it vengefully upon the chopping

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stump so that splinters of wood flew all about, he was unaware I stood behind him; and when he set out with purposeful stride towards Billington's house, I went accompanying him until, half-way there, he turned and shouted for me to return with his gun to his house.

It was well I did, for I learned later Newcomen struck Billington twice in the face with his whip before others disarmed him, and Billington had demanded to know who had told him of his secret courtship of Patience. If I had been there, I am not certain that my face wouldn't have betrayed me, and it was necessary to the success of what I had in mind that no one suspect me.

The next day I stole away from my tasks for an hour or two and watched Billington as he worked in his field. Even from a distance I could see the terrible wounds of the lash upon his face, and the look of murder written plain upon it. For two days I watched him, risking the discovery of my absence by Mr. Newcomen, until on the third day Billington suddenly left the field and went alone into the wood.

Silently I followed, careful lest Patience be waiting for him. He took a roundabout route, doubling back to a spot near the Newcomen field, where a large rock overlooked the path which Newcomen followed each morning when he went to work; and as I saw Billington furtively reconnoitering the spot, I knew what was in his mind. Newcomen was always first upon the field, soon after dawn in the summer, his sons and hired men following perhaps a half hour later. I knew then that Billington would be behind that rock the next morning, possibly armed with his blunderbuss with which he was fond of shooting game.

That night at the supper table, Mr. Newcomen demanded to know where I had disappeared to that day, and I told him that since I had not felt well, I had gone off to lie in the sun in the woods, at which he made some angry remarks about my writing. Then Patience spoke up in my behalf, saying that some day everybody would be proud of me when they read my account of Plymouth colony, and I blushed at her words and felt I had not made my plans in vain.

For with her father gone, murdered by Billington, and Billington hanged as sure he would be, who was to stand between Patience and me? A thriving farmer I would never be, and my earnings as a servant were little, but I was certain Patience could come to love me as I already loved her, and we would get along as other married couples had.

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I slept little that night, and was up long before dawn. When Mrs. Newcomen rang the bell for breakfast, I went in and sat down at the table with Mr. Newcomen and the rest of the family, and was disappointed to find that Patience was not there. Her mother said she was feeling ill, and when I tried to eat my breakfast and could not, she put her hand upon my shoulder and said that perhaps I was ill, too, and ought to rest in my room for the day.

After breakfast I went into the lean-to, knowing that the waiting would be the hardest. I heard Mr. Newcomen come out on the porch, stamping his feet in his boots as he usually did, and go to the barn. One of the two horses nickered as he took them down the path that led through the stockade gate, and, after several furlongs, past the boulder where I was certain Billington now lay in wait.

I went on pacing in my room when I heard a sound, and turning, saw Patience standing in my doorway, looking at me with an expression of utter loathing.

"You!" she spat. "You think I could not recognise this paper from your journal, and the ink you are accustomed to use?" She flung at me a piece of paper which I recognised as the note I had written to her father, and I felt the venomous contempt of her words sink deep into my blood.

"My father might be foolish enough to have hired you, whom none other would hire, because they know you are feckless and vainglorious and useless. But I shall tell him what a loathsome creature you are, to turn upon those who used you much better than you deserve. I shall see you are thrown out of my father's house, and what becomes of you I do not care. Go live with the snakes and rodents, where you belong!"

Then she was gone, and I stood with my blood pounding in my head, for I recognised the truth in her words, which had destroyed in a trice not only my dream of a life together with her, but the vision of my completed journal that had supported what shreds of self-esteem I possessed, and I was bereft of all hope.

But perhaps not all! Stung into action by a desperate thought, I went running into the fields. A grey light glimmered over the land, and in the distance I could see Mr. Newcomen approaching the big rock at the edge of the forest where I knew Billington lay in wait.

I tried to shout, but my throat seemed paralysed, and I could utter no sound. I began running wildly, hopelessly, and then I realised that I was getting closer, and might catch up with my employer before he reached the rock. Which I did, but he did not turn at my

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approach, possibly because he could not hear my footsteps in the soft-ploughed earth.

Then I was beside him, tugging at his sleeve, and at that instant the world exploded in a blaze of light and sound, and I was aware of plunging forward into utter darkness.

When I came to myself I was lying in my cot in my lean-to, and Mrs. Newcomen sat beside me.

"Now rest," she said. "I know you ran to tell my husband of your misdeeds, but you were too late. That evil man Billington waylaid and killed him, and some of the shot struck you down."

"How long have I lain here?" I asked.

"For a day and a night. Now get some sleep."

"What happened to Billington?" I asked.

"The council has passed judgment on him," she said, sighing. "They will hang him this afternoon."

"No, no, they must not!" I cried.

She placed a hand upon my head, pressing me gently back upon the bed, and I saw her eyes were red from weeping.

"Sleep," she said and went away.

I waited for a while, and then sat up on the edge of my cot; the world was swimming and I felt sick to my stomach. I fumbled at the bandage which encircled my head, and then, making a great resolve, I rose and put on my clothes.

How I managed to get to the meeting house I will never know; every few moments I would have to stop until the fog cleared away from my vision, and then I would stumble on again. By the time I reached the square it was too late. Billington hung from a stout branch of a large tree that grew beside the meeting house, and his limbs were still jerking. A crowd of people stood about in silence.

"Cut him down!" I cried, struggling into the midst of them. "He is not guilty. I am the murderer. I knew he was going to kill Mr. Newcomen, and I did not tell. Hang me! Hang me!"

I felt arms around me and voices, sympathetic and soothing.

"Poor lad, the shooting has made him mad."

"He'll never amount to anything, but I feel sorry for him."

Then someone sat me down in the grass and patted me upon the head, as if I were a pet they were fond of but felt contempt for.

And I could do nothing but look up, trembling with hatred, at the impostor hanging from the rope who had usurped my rightful place in the annals of history as the first murderer of Plymouth colony.

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a *NEW* detective story by

ROBERT TWOHY

We can't say that a more unusual crime story has never been written, but this one comes close . . .

A MASTERPIECE OF CRIME

by ROBERT TWOHY

An old drunk mumbled "G'night" to George, the night man at Pete's Place, a workingman's bar in Lindenvale, and went out the back door. It was about 1:30, a cool night in April.

The drunk got across State Boulevard, and that put him at the railroad tracks. He stumbled across them and was on Dorst Street. He made his way two blocks and then his frail body jerked violently; he gave a small scream and pitched forward on his face. He lay there and didn't move.

Somebody bent over him and reached inside his old gray overcoat, felt around, came up with a wallet. The person straightened, looked right and left, and the street was quiet—no lighted windows, no oncoming headlights. The person took a card from the wallet, slipped it into a pocket. He didn't look further in the wallet but dropped it on the sidewalk by the old man. Then he walked fast to the nearest corner, turned, and was gone from the street.

The drunk lay nearly an hour, unseen. Then a police cruiser came down Dorst, for no particular reason, just cruising Lindenvale's quiet neighborhoods. The cops saw the drunk, the car stopped, and the cops got out. They figured they had input for the local detox center, or if the gentleman preferred, the drunk tank; then they saw the wallet, and the knife handle that looked as if it were attached to the man's back.

One of them went back to the car and radioed the station. Within

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a few minutes two more patrol cars were parked near the corpse; and a little later the ambulance came.

That was the beginning of the Kerrigan case.

From the *Lindenvale Courier,* April 28:

KNIFE SLAYING ON DORST STREET

A local resident, David J. Kerrigan, 71, was stabbed in the back last night as he walked toward his roominghouse at 948 Dorst St., and according to Dr. Walter S. Hale, who examined him at the scene, died immediately.

The murder weapon, a 9-inch carving knife, was still in the victim's back when his body was discovered by police officers Charles Cullen and J. C. Cook at 2:42 A.M. Kerrigan's empty wallet was found near the body.

Investigation disclosed that Kerrigan had left Pete's Place, an establishment on Lawton St., shortly past 1:30 A.M. Employee George Garbino, who knew the victim as a regular patron, told police that in the course of the evening Kerrigan showed him his empty wallet, asking that subsequent purchases be added to the charge account he maintained there.

Police theorize that the elderly pensioner was slain by someone unknown to him, because according to Garbino and to Rose LaBell, the deceased's landlady, all who knew him were aware that at the end of each month he was usually without funds.

He had lived at the Dorst St. address the past four years. His previous residence is unknown.

Detective Thomas Birkell, in charge of the investigation, stated that no significant leads have yet developed, but that the police "are bending every effort to bring about a solution to the crime."

This report was not entirely accurate. George hadn't told the cops that Kerrigan was a regular patron; what he had said was, "He was a regular pain in the butt." And Tom Birkell had said nothing about bending every effort; he had told reporter Joe Fontaine, "If we get no prints off the knife or the wallet, we're nowhere—we've got nothing."

But Fontaine, a lanky 24-year-old with a big nose and straight brown hair usually falling in his eyes, who looked like a hick but wasn't, figured that George's comment was a little earthy for the *Courier,* which like most suburban dailies tended to publish only the bland; and that Birkell, an amiable type, wouldn't mind if his

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words were given a twist toward optimism. After all, most readers like to hope that murders have solutions—particularly local ones.

Birkell, a big man of 50 with a calm pleasant face, read the story in mid-afternoon, while sitting at Hava Java, on Howell Street near the police station. He gave a snort, then a chuckle.

The pretty-if-aging redhead behind the counter said, "What's funny, Tom?"

"This story about the Kerrigan killing."

"I read it." She sighed, shook her head. "I guess I got no sense of humor."

Birkell read the quote Fontaine had attributed to him, and told her what he had really said.

She grinned. "That's Fontaine—he told me once he prefers crime fiction to fact. It makes more sense, gets somewhere in the end . . . *Were* there any prints on the knife?"

"None. And it's just a standard carving knife, like you find in any hardware store."

"And none on the wallet?"

"Just Kerrigan's."

"So what do you do now?"

Birkell shrugged, and drank coffee.

"So it's just another dumb street killing, winding up nowhere."

Birkell rubbed his good-sized jaw, looked thoughtful. "Muggers don't usually use carving knives."

She set her clean cups in the drainer, and looked interested. He talked in his low voice, more to himself than to her, "Aside from that, a mugger seeing an old guy half drunk will come up in front of him, show him his blade, tell the guy to hand over. That's the smart way—if you come up behind him and stick him, you've got to go over him, through his pockets, maybe inside his clothes—extra time and work, and maybe in the end you get nothing."

"Like this guy got nothing."

"Uh huh. But maybe money wasn't his object."

"You mean, take out the old guy's wallet to make it look like a mugging when it isn't?"

"Uh huh. The killer might be someone from Kerrigan's past."

"Hey!" Her eyes were bright. "I like that better!"

Birkell gave her a slow grin. "Don't quote me to Joe Fontaine—he'd be off and running. If he prefers fiction, he'd love that angle."

He got up. " 'Cause that's what it probably is—fiction. Probably the guy *did* brace Kerrigan from the front, and Kerrigan brought

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out his empty wallet and the guy freaked, Kerrigan tried to run, the guy let him have it in the back . . . So long, Carol."

"So long, Tom. I still like the other version."

"Makes a better story, yeah . . . doesn't matter, really. No leads to Kerrigan's past, and the killer's home free—unless something drops out of the blue."

Something did. A standard business-size envelope came to Birkell at the police station next afternoon, with a typed name and address: Detective Thomas Birkell, Lindenvale Police Dept., Lindenvale, CA 94010—there was no return address.

The postmark was 28 Apr PM Lindenvale.

Birkell took it to the detective's room, sat down at his steel desk, slit the envelope, spread it a little, saw a card inside, took the card out, looked at it, gave a soft whistle. He was holding the social-security card of David J. Kerrigan.

He sat a few seconds, then laid the card on the desk, spread the envelope again, and saw two folded sheets of white paper. He took them by a corner, shook them so they opened, dropped them on the desk, one on top of the other. He bent over them, knuckles supporting his broad cheeks, and gazed at the top sheet.

The upper third of it was occupied by a fresh dollar bill, Scotch-taped at the ends to the paper. On the dollar, dead-center in Washington's face, was Scotch-taped a bright new penny.

"Whadaya know," murmured Birkell, knowing nothing.

Below the dollar was double-spaced, error-free typing:

Detective Birkell (your name is almost a great coincidence!):

I read in the *Courier* that you are in charge of the Kerrigan investigation. I enclose Mr. Kerrigan's card, to convince you that I am his murderer.

I had nothing against him. I had seen him a few times at Pete's Place (where I stop infrequently, and am not known). He was a noisy, wretched, worn-out old man. I followed him several times to his home. The night of the murder I left before him, waited in the park, followed him down his street, and killed him.

This may seem a stupid, pointless murder. It is not. It will become part of a classic case. Not a single figure but a grouping is what makes a work of art—as The Ripper made a great composition by using tawdry little figures. So will I.

This letter and others I will send you will become elements in The

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Lindenvale Murders, and increase its stature as a work of art.

Do you have the feeling I am somewhat mad?

Perhaps I am. But here is the concept: 7 more deaths, by stabbing, on dark streets of Lindenvale—7 more murders of used-up, dismal old men.

That ended the top sheet. Birkell pinched it at a corner, placed it to the side, and started on the second sheet:

My concept is not original. I seek to create a real-life masterpiece drawing from a masterpiece of imagination. Think fiction, not fact, as the basis of The Lindenvale Murders.

In the original, murder was done by strangulation—but my hands lack the strength. So it was necessary for me to use a knife—I have 7 more knives, identical.

Here are some clues, because a classic murder must have clues. The clues are fair, because I have always played fair.

(1) In the original, Benjamin stood near, and within an hour of each death, made his solemn comment.

(2) Her Highness awarded me the highest honor.

(3) The name I use is a combination: it has much to do with water, and with the earth as well. I have taken the name from the original. Discover it, then look in the latest Lindenvale telephone book: you will find the name listed there, with the correct address. Come there, tell me the name, and I will surrender to you, and congratulate you on a brilliant job of deduction.

Do not look on these papers for fingerprints. This is to be a work of art—not to be solved routinely. There are no fingerprints.

Best wishes, Detective—and be assured that all I have written is accurate and true—because I have always played fair.

There was no signature.

Birkell sat a while. He read the letter again, then one more time. He still touched the sheets only at the corners—the writer said no fingerprints, but anyone can get careless—there was always that hope.

He took the two sheets by the corners into a room where there was a photocopier, and photocopied them. He folded the copies and slid them into his jacket. The originals he carried back to his desk. He got a manila envelope, eased the social-security card, the envelope, and the letter pages into it, went to his locker, and put the

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manila envelope on the shelf. He'd check later for fingerprints—there was no big hurry to find out there weren't any.

He went out into the sunshine to think.

He walked down to State Boulevard, across the tracks to Dorst, then into the park. He ambled along, wondering why his name was almost a great coincidence. He stopped to watch a couple of senior citizens pitching horseshoes . . . the letter-writer didn't like senior citizens. Or maybe he loved them. Whatever, they were to be the figures in his classic composition of murder. Kerrigan had been the lead-off man—7 more were to follow. Because the original case from which he was lifting his concept had had 8 victims.

Birkell walked away, across a grassy place. A pretty little woman sat under a tree, reading a paperback book. She looked relaxed and content. The book was probably a pleasant romantic novel . . . fiction. Think fiction, not fact. Joe Fontaine liked crime fiction.

The day was warm. At the edge of the park was an ice-cream truck. Birkell went over to it, ordered an ice-cream cone, gave the guy a buck, got change, walked away . . . A new dollar and a penny, a bright new penny . . . The letter hadn't said what they meant. Maybe they meant nothing at all, but the guy said he always played fair.

Birkell walked out of the park, past the old-style train depot—a big man with a mild face, eating ice cream. He walked past some shops, turned up Howell, walked a block, turned north, and went into the offices of the *Courier*.

He stood at the counter until a sour-faced lady came up, then he asked if Joe Fontaine was in. She said that he had called in sick.

"He said it was bubonic plague." Her small eyes were cold. "He's always trying to be funny. I don't think it's funny." Birkell concluded that she would consider very few things funny.

He got Fontaine's home address from her and walked four blocks, to Lang Street, a quiet residential block of modest old houses and larger ones converted into apartments. He found 1012, looked for Apartment 5, and didn't find it. A tall man in a neat suit came down the driveway next to the building, paused, and said pleasantly, "Looking for someone?"

"Joe Fontaine. He's in number five, they told me. I can't find it."

"In the back, top of the stairs."

Birkell thanked him, walked down the driveway, and at the rear saw a wooden stairway. He climbed it; two doors were at the top, marked 4 and 5; a doorbell dangled on a wire at 5. Birkell figured

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that if he pushed it, it might work, or he might get electrocuted. He pulled open a sagging screen door and knocked.

A raspy voice sounded: "If you want infection, you've come to the right place."

"Fontaine? This is Birkell."

"Good. Glad you came. I've got the plague."

"I heard. Open the door."

"*You* open it."

Birkell turned the knob and came into a tiny studio apartment, with stacks of books everywhere. What space the books didn't occupy was taken up by a pull-out couch bed on which, among books and magazines, lay Joe Fontaine, gaunt and woebegone, hair in his eyes, a ratty-looking yellow blanket pulled around him. A wooden box near the bed had a quart bottle of beer on it, a glass, an ashtray full of butts. The air was heavy, the shades were down. Gloom was the watchword. The decaying figure on the bed spoke wanly, "Hello, Birkell. I'm terminal."

"Sorry to hear it. Got a load on last night, huh?"

"Strictly business," said the wan man. "I went over to trick George Garbino into spilling why he'd rubbed out Kerrigan. But before my subtle questions started registering, I caught the plague."

"So you think George is the killer?"

"Beyond question. Everybody knows he's the local hit man for the mob, and he had the contract on Kerrigan. Whose real name was McRigatoni, of the Milpitas McRigatonis."

Birkell said, in soft tones of amazement, "I didn't know that!"

"You should get around more—get out and put your foot on the public pulse, find out what's happening." He extended a trembling claw for the glass on the box. "You want a beer?"

"No."

"I don't either, but my doctor insists." He took a big swallow, looked sicker, gagged, stared forlornly at the glass, drank it dry, set it back on the box, and muttered, "Don't be in my way if I have to lunge for the bathroom."

"Could I open a window? It's pretty stuffy in here."

" 'Fetid' is the word. The windows don't open, they're warped. Like most things. Open the door if you want."

Birkell went to the door, opened it part way, sucked in a few lungfuls of less polluted air, and came back. Fontaine said, "Sit down."

"Where?"

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"Shove that heap of books there." Birkell picked up the heap and under it found a wooden chair. He set the heap on the floor and sat down. "I came because maybe you can help me with something."

"What?"

"Carol at Hava Java says you read crime fiction."

"Sure." A bony arm flopped, indicating books. "Read it and write it too." Another flop brought to attention a tiny desk on which were a typewriter, stack of paper, more magazines and books. "No acceptances yet but what the hell—Shanahan was in his seventies before he got in print."

"Who's Shanahan?"

"Guy I used to know."

"Fiction writer?"

"No, cat-food taster. Died at seventy-three. Made the obit page in both San Francisco papers . . . What's crime fiction got to do with a detective whose mind is like a finely tuned rake?"

Birkell took the folded photocopies from his jacket. Fontaine hitched himself in the bed so that his head was vertical against the back of the couch, took the papers, gazed at them. He raised his eyes, stared at Birkell. "What the hell is this?"

"Photocopy of a letter I got in the mail. With a dollar and a penny taped on it."

The reporter nodded approvingly. "You got a nice print of the dollar. Penny's just a black circle—looks like a cannon ball went through Washington's head."

He read for a few seconds, then looked up again. "Is this a gag?"

Birkell shook his head. "Kerrigan's social-security card was in the envelope."

The reporter went back to reading. Then he lowered the two sheets and studied the ceiling—he was now looking considerably less terminal. In fact, his eyes had taken on a luster. He murmured, "I'll be damned. He's copying a murder, a fiction murder. I'll be double-damned."

Birkell nodded. "I don't know fiction. That's why I came to you."

"To pick my diseased brain—what a revolting notion! Well, let's see, what can we get out of this? The guy's a nut. D'you agree with that?"

Birkell said he did. Fontaine went on, "A nut with a dream—he'll create a masterpiece of crime. He'll waste eight old men, basing his plot on a piece of fiction that has intrigued him—where eight people are strangled. But he's going to stab 'em, because he has no confi-

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dence in his hands—so he's not a tough, macho guy. He may be an old guy—maybe that's why he has a thing about old men. He's a writer, or was. A writer of crime fiction."

"Think so?"

"Uh huh. He speaks twice about how he's always played fair. That's one of the sacred rules for the detective writer—play fair with the reader. Meaning—lay all the clues out in the open. Murder stories were a game in the old days, a game between writer and reader. This guy could be someone who learned his trade back in the thirties . . . Dollar and a penny? What's that for? Maybe what Kerrigan had on him?"

"George said he had nothing in his wallet at Pete's. And the dollar is new, never been folded or wadded up—so it wasn't in Kerrigan's pocket or wallet."

"So the guy's telling us something with the dollar and the penny—*but he's not saying what.*" Fontaine frowned, put the papers down, pulled at his lower lip, then shrugged. "Her Highness . . . Queen Victoria? Is he basing his great spectacular on a Victorian murder case? Benjamin, Big Ben—London. A London mass murderer of Victoria's time—but why would she honor him? 'The highest honor' . . ." He pulled at his lip again, then chewed it. "Victoria had no truck with crime fiction—as far as I know."

"Maybe not Victoria."

"Maybe not—but what other queens are there worth mentioning? Queen Elizabeth? Queen of Sheba? Queen for a Day? Steve McQueen? Queens full?" He gave a sudden groan, then grinned, slapped his head, shook it. "I'm a blockhead, Watson. You're gazing on a supreme blockhead."

The detective, wondering vaguely why he had become Watson, waited.

"It's obvious, all too obvious. An old-time crime buff speaking of royalty usually has one person in mind. Ellery Queen."

Birkell had heard that name. "That's a detective character, isn't it?"

"It is indeed. There's Holmes, there's Poirot, there's Queen—a few others. They're the master sleuths. The most probable thing is—Her Highness is Ellery Queen."

After a silence Birkell said, "So where does that get us?"

The reporter scowled, shook his head. "I don't know. Queen awarded this guy the highest honor . . . but the guy is a Londoner, and Queen never operated in London. His area is New York. And

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his villains, he just caught 'em—he didn't award them honors." He pulled at his lip again, shook his head, shifted around on the bed so that some books spilled off, then barked, "Hah!"

"Hah what?"

"Queen's more than a master sleuth—he's a writer, an anthologist—"

"What's an anthologist?" Like a lot of bright men, Birkell had unclear knowledge of words he didn't run into in the normal course of a day.

"A guy who collects other guys' stories in books. Queen has published about a hundred anthologies, and for most of 'em he's written an introduction. In one of those introductions he's awarded this guy the highest honor."

Birkell felt confused. First, Ellery Queen was a master sleuth of fiction, now he was like a real person. But that was Fontaine—he *did* tend to play games. This must be more of his game-playing. Birkell would put up with it—if it ended by getting him somewhere.

He watched as the scrawny man pawed around in the litter on the bed and came up with a smallish magazine. Fontaine flipped open the cover, peered inside, muttered some numbers, dropped the magazine, rolled over on it, threw an arm over the far side of the bed, came up with a telephone, which he set on a clear space on the bed. He picked up the receiver, then dialed three times.

He frowned, muttered, heaved around, pulled the magazine he'd looked at from under him, looked again, muttered numbers, dropped the magazine, resumed dialing.

Birkell said, "Who are you calling?"

"Ellery Queen."

"This great fiction detective?" Birkell got no giggles from telephone japery. He felt sudden sympathy for the sour-faced lady at the *Courier* who had to cope with Fontaine daily.

"Hello? I'm calling from Lindenvale, California—name's Fontaine. What we have here is a real-life murder case, and maybe we can crack it if we can find a quotation . . . No, not from the magazine. Probably from one of the Queen anthologies, published maybe years ago."

The cheerful voice on the other end said, "Who do you want to talk to?"

"I don't know. Research, maybe—if you've got a research department. Somebody familiar with the Queen anthologies."

"Hold on, please."

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Things clicked over 3000 miles of wire. Then Fontaine said, "Hello, Ellery? How's it going?—oh, fine here. We got a dandy murder and—what? Oh, your father just came in? Hot case there too, huh? Well, good luck, and regards to the Inspector.

"Listen, Ellery, we need some information on something you wrote, probably in an anthology introduction—we're trying to track down a story that bears on our murder . . . Title? Don't know. Author? Don't know that either. Anthology title? Don't know. When published? Haven't the foggiest . . . Yeah, I know there are lots of Queen anthologies but this is a real murder we've got here, and if we can't find this story we might have a bunch more."

He paused, and Birkell, eyeing his tense face, concluded that this wasn't a game he was playing after all.

"Yeah, I know. I wish I *could* give you someplace to begin—wait a minute, hang on." His voice, which had started to droop, was suddenly sharp again. He dropped the phone on the bed. "Dollar and a penny." He stared at Birkell. "He's got that at the top—like maybe it keys on a title. Dollar and a penny—what's it mean to you?"

"What's it mean?" Birkell spread his hands. "Like what? You mean, what comes to mind? Well, paper and copper?"

Fontaine nodded, shrugged. "Or Washington and Lincoln . . . or something and nothing. Keep cooking, rack your keen brain for something else."

Birkell ran the dollar and the penny around his keen brain. A number popped up. "How about—101?"

"101—something clicks." Fontaine grabbed the phone. "You still there? Good. Here's a thought—may mean something. How about 101?"

Ellery's clear voice came right back at him: "101 Years' Entertainment—the Great Detective Stories, 1841 to 1941."

Fontaine gave a yelp.

"There's a long introduction—and a short introduction to every story."

"Do you have a copy of the book handy?"

"Sure. This *is* important? You're not just winning a bar-room bet?"

"I don't go to bar-rooms since I got the plague. Yes, it's important, Ellery. I've got Detective Birkell of the Lindenvale fuzz right here with me."

"Okay. I'll be one minute."

Fontaine waited, making no jokes this time. He looked at Birkell,

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whose name was almost a great coincidence. How could a name be *almost* a coincidence?

Ellery's voice came back: "I have the book. It has fifty stories."

"Great. Look among the crime writers—see if there's an author with a name like Birkell."

"A name *like* Birkell?"

"Yeah. Burke, Burkhart, Berkovitz—anything like that?"

A brief silence. Then, "Thomas Burke—his story is called *The Hands of Mr. Ottermole.*"

Fontaine muttered, "Ottermole." A name "much to do with water, and with the earth as well." The reporter said, this time softly, "That's it."

Ellery said, "I've turned to it. The story has a one-sentence introduction: 'No finer crime story has ever been written, period.' "

Her Highness awarded me the highest honor. Fontaine murmured, "I have only two words. Thank you, Mr. Queen."

"You're welcome. Hope it helped. Let me know how it comes out. And sorry about your plague."

"There's a bright side. It's terminal."

"Good. Then you won't have to worry about it."

"Not much longer . . . I'm joking, of course."

"I figured that. Goodbye, Mr. Fontaine."

He put the phone back in its cradle and fell back on the bed, hands over his eyes. "*The Hands of Mr. Ottermole,* by Thomas Burke. 'No finer crime story has ever been written, period.' I thought I'd read every crime story worth reading—how could I have missed that one? There are gaping holes in my education, Watson."

He slid across the bed, flung an arm down, came up with the phonebook, and started to flip through it. "This character always plays fair, so he says, and if so he'll be listed—here are the O's. O'Malley, lots of O'Malleys . . . O'Neill, dozens . . . O'Reilly, O'Rourke, O'Shea—what is this, the Dublin directory? Otero, Otis, Otomari, O'Toole, O'Toole—back to Erin . . ." His voice trailed off. Then Birkell saw a light in his eyes, a light of unadulterated astonishment. "Damn," murmured the reporter. "Damn, damn, and triple-sec damn!"

Birkell yelled, "Is it listed?"

"It's listed." Fontaine's voice was a low groan—expressive of total overwhelmedness. "Ottermole, M. R."

Birkell jumped from the chair. "The address!"

Fontaine dropped the phonebook and made a slow gesture.

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"What are you pointing at?"

"Behind you. Next door. Mr. Ottermole lives at 1012 Lang Street, Apartment 4."

They gazed at each other. Birkell mumbled, "You're not doing one of your funnies."

"No. God's truth. M. R. Ottermole is listed as the man next door."

After a silence Birkell could only murmur, "Talk about coincidence."

"If you want to call it that. Maybe there's more to things than meets the searching scientific eye."

Birkell wasn't about to argue. Here he'd come, on a vague hunch that some good might come of talking to Fontaine about crime fiction—and with one phone call the killer was identified, located.

He said, "Who'd you call?"

Fontaine picked up the magazine he'd looked in and held it up to show the cover: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. "Phone number's listed inside."

"How'd you know—what made you think they could help?"

"When you want to find out something, go to the source."

"Okay." Birkell didn't understand everything, or much of anything actually, but he didn't need to. Mr. Ottermole was listed as living next door.

He said, "I'll go see if he's home."

A voice sounded, and the detective whirled—the voice came from behind him. He stared at the partly open door. The voice came from outside the screen: "I'm right here. May I come in?" It was a thin, gentle voice.

Birkell swung his gaze back to Fontaine, who had slid from the bed and now stood by it, a bundle of bones in jockey shorts. Fontaine said, "Is that you, Mr. Becker?"

"Yes. Or if you prefer, Mr. Ottermole. May I come in?"

Fontaine looked at Birkell. The detective had flipped his jacket clear. His hand was on the .38 on his belt. He nodded.

"Come in," said Fontaine.

The door was pushed open. The tall neat man whom Birkell had talked to in the driveway came in. His hands were at his sides. He looked at Birkell's hand on his gun, and smiled, shook his head.

"No need. I don't have a gun. And my knives are in the apartment."

Birkell said, "You're Mr. Ottermole?"

"Yes. To the extent of getting a phonebook listing. The rest of the

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time I'm Mr. Becker. The listing was to help make this a truly classic case."

Fontaine said, "This is Detective Birkell."

"Yes. I wrote you a letter. You did as I suggested—turned your thoughts to fiction. You came here to Mr. Fontaine to talk about fiction. I hardly expected *that*, but strange things happen. When I saw you earlier, out in front, I thought you might be a policeman—you have the look."

After twenty-four years on the force, Birkell supposed he did.

The tall man went on, "I walked a bit, wondered what you had come for, then came back. The door was open. I came up the stairs, stood outside, and listened." He turned to Fontaine. "It was clever of you to call *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*."

Birkell said, "Before you go on I have to warn you that anything you say—"

"Spare me your warnings. I gave Mr. Kerrigan no warning—why should you warn me?"

"For the record." And the detective proceeded to warn him, while the tall man listened patiently, and at the end "Mr. Ottermole" nodded. "Now can I go on?"

"Please do," said Birkell.

"Thank you. I'm really quite relieved. I had no intention of committing further murders. My classic case—yes, I did want to leave behind a masterpiece. I was a crime writer, as Mr. Fontaine surmised—made a small name for myself, but that was long ago. I turned to real estate, made a living. The years passed, then I was alone, my work done, nothing ahead to do. A kind of passion took hold of me. To leave proof that I'd actually been here on earth—and what had always fascinated me? Crime, murder—I decided to commit, in reality, a great crime, based on my all-time favorite story. I would re-enact the murders of Mr. Ottermole."

He turned his gaze to Fontaine. "I moved here four months ago, and you knew me as Mr. Becker, to nod to, and say good morning—as I knew you. That was what I wanted—to be mild, unassuming. Then, to explode the truth, the shocking truth—that I was a mass murderer! What a sensation! I would have fame—and a great classic trial!" He shook his head, his smile turned down. "Not to be. The Lindenvale Case is aborted—and all I've accomplished is the murder of one drab nobody. Writing about crime," he said after a pause, "is much different from the actuality."

Fontaine said, "I imagine it is."

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"When I saw Kerrigan's dead, dumb, pathetic face, the passion that had possessed me was gone. I tried to bring it back to life—I wrote the letter—but it was false. I knew I wouldn't kill again." He turned to Birkell. "If you hadn't found Mr. Ottermole, I'd have come to you tomorrow."

Birkell said, "I wouldn't know. But you'd better come with me now."

"Of course." He smiled at Fontaine. "I'm glad I overheard you. This turned out to be not a classic crime after all—but you made some fine deductions. Ellery Queen couldn't have done better."

Fontaine said, "I only asked for some help from a master."

The man's smile widened. "I like that. Queen loved the story of Ottermole—it's only fitting that he should play a part in thwarting The Lindenvale Case. Did I hear you say you've never read the story?"

"To my embarrassment, no."

"You should."

"I will."

They were at the door. Birkell turned. "Thanks, Joe."

"Sure."

They went out, closing the door.

Fontaine lay back on the bed, thinking that a few hours' sleep should cure him of the plague. Then he'd go up to the police station, bring the facts up to date for tomorrow's *Courier*, then proceed to the library, get a copy of *101 Years' Entertainment*, and patch up the gaping hole in his education.

It really was amazing . . .

that he'd gone a lifetime without reading a story

than which

no finer crime story has ever been written,

period

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This is the 559th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a poignant vignette . . .

The author, Evelyn A. Olyarnik, is in her late thirties, single, and lives in northern Ohio. When she is not writing, she "enjoys playing the piano and junking around for antiques."

Ms. Olyarnik has been in the restaurant business for twenty years, which has afforded her "the chance to study the pageant of humanity with all its diverse characters." Restaurant? Good background for a second story?

I'LL NEVER LEAVE YOU, DEAR

by EVELYN A. OLYARNIK

Denise sat at the table looking at the mud-colored coffee getting cold in the cup in front of her. She could think only of brown and red and ugly. She didn't want to look at him, not yet. She didn't want to feel sorry for him if he looked sad, she didn't want to know if he looked relieved. She didn't want to hear, but she had to. She had to remember the tone of his voice, the words, the lack of feeling that came with them.

"I didn't mean for this to happen, Denise, you've got to believe me," he was saying.

No, he hadn't meant for it to happen, nobody meant for it to happen. But it happened. She looked up at him now, his bald head stupidly reflecting the ceiling light in the kitchen. Was it the head she'd noticed first? No, it had been his eyes. So alive. So alert, as if all kinds of wonderful things were going on inside his head and trying to come out through his eyes.

She remembered the first time she saw him. He wore jeans and

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sandals, and the top of his head was bald, but the hair along the sides of his head had been allowed to grow down to his shoulders. An old hippie. It was in the supermarket over the frozen shrimp. They'd talked, he'd helped her out to the car with the groceries, and she'd invited him over for a sandwich.

"You're a good cook," he'd told her jokingly, while he ate.

"I know," she'd answered in the same playful tone.

"You sound just like the woman on the television commercial," he'd said. "You know, the one where the guy has a cold and his wife gives him that cough syrup and he says, 'You're a good wife,' and she answers, 'I know'."

After that, the "I know" became one of their things. They wrote it in notes. "I'm sorry," would be answered with "I know," and it would mean all was forgiven and forgotten and okay.

Denise looked back at the coffee cup and remembered the time she'd found the phone number with the girl's name on the paper. She'd exploded. "I can't stand the thought of you being with someone else. I won't share. I'll kill you first," she'd told him.

He'd explained the note easily enough: it was a lead on a new job, and she'd told him, "It's only because I love you so much."

"I know," he'd answered.

They'd both laughed and the dark clouds evaporated.

"I'll never leave you, dear," he'd said. But wasn't he leaving her now? Wasn't that what he was saying?

"I can't help it, Denise, I love her." His voice was coming to her from somewhere far away. "She reminds me a lot of you. She even looks a little like you."

Denise glared at him. "But she isn't me," she said.

"I know," he answered thoughtlessly. The stricken look on his face told her he hadn't meant to say their special thing, not now, not for this. But it hurt. She felt the iron wall she'd built against tears corroding. No. She wouldn't cry. Maybe later.

"I forgot the sandwiches," she said numbly. She left him sitting at the kitchen table while she moved like a robot, stacking meat and tomatoes and lettuce on bread. She poked around in the silverware drawer looking for a sharp knife. She didn't want the last sandwich she made for him to have jagged edges. It was only after she'd cut both sandwiches that she remembered how much he hated having his sandwiches cut. Too hard to eat that way, too messy.

With the knife still in her hand she started toward the table, talking as she went. "I'm sorry, I forgot and cut your sandwich."

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He didn't even turn around to answer her. He sat with his back to her and said, "That's okay, it doesn't matter, dear."

No, it didn't matter, nothing mattered. Only this new woman in his life mattered. Their three years together wouldn't matter any more. Peanut butter wouldn't matter. What a dumb thing to think of now, but he'd made breakfast for her and served it to her in bed so many times. So proud of himself. Peanut butter sandwiches and coffee. Like a little boy. As if they were two children playing house.

Well, the games were over. Everything was over. Why did he call her dear if everything was over? Why had he said, "I'll never leave you, dear," if everything was over?

Denise felt the knife growing warmer in her hand, as if it were alive. And suddenly the knife became alive, impelling, moving, and she was moving with it. She felt her arm being lifted high up into the air and down, down into the blue shirt surrounded by swirls of purple. Again and again. Stabbing. Pushing. Ending. It was as though she were detached from the arm and the knife and watched them from somewhere else. Love had made her weak, now hate made her strong. Strong enough to watch as the body in the blue shirt slumped forward against the table, then over the side of the chair onto the floor, while the arm and the knife moved with it, never missing a stroke. More. More.

Finally the roar of a thousand oceans subsided while the waves washed over her, cleansing her, leaving her drained and weak. She felt only an urge to see his face. She turned his head over, wiping spatters of blood away with her hand. His face was contorted into an ugly grimace. His eyes disappointed her. They weren't pretty now, they were wide-open in a stare of surprise. That wasn't right. His eyes should be closed. Should she close them? And his mouth. It was open too. Why, he looked as if he were about to say something to her. What would he have told her? Then she heard him. He was saying, "I'll never leave you, dear."

She smiled and bent forward to rest her lips against the hairless scalp. "I know," she murmured softly into the top of his head, "I know."

"Q"

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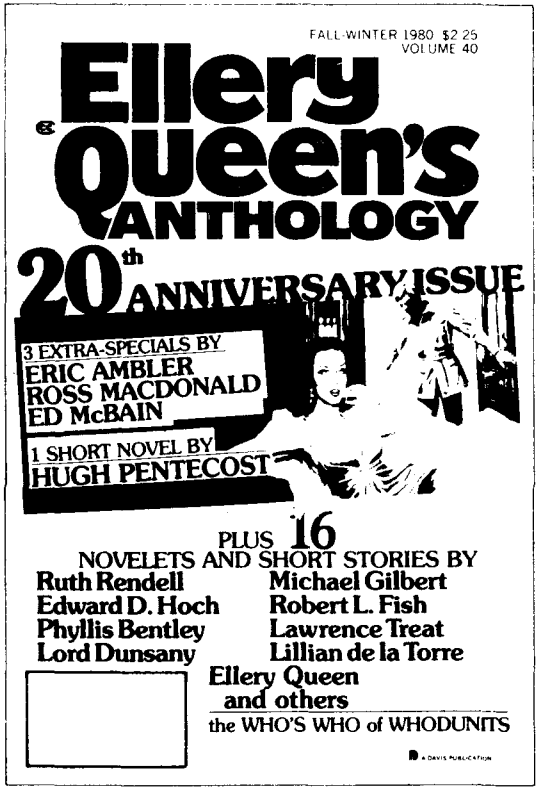

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 560th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a thief should pay attention to his superstitions—and to details . . .

The author, Will Murray, was twenty-seven when he submitted his first story. He has written numerous nonfiction articles, most of them about pulp magazines of the 1930s—Mr. Murray's hobby and a fine background for a newcomer to mystery fiction . . .

A QUARTER FOR CRAZY EDDIE

by WILL MURRAY

They tell me I could make more money robbing banks or holding up liquor stores, especially drifting as much as I do. I know that. I also know that's not for me. I'm a regular guy with old-fashioned ideas about working. It's just that I'm a little unorthodox in the way I go about it.

This time it was Boston. The company's name was the Dyna Corporation. According to their want ad, they manufactured electronic components for the Automatic Testing Industry and needed stock help. Perfect.

The Dyna Corporation was an old twelve-story building on Summer Street. I was waiting outside before they opened for business, and before any other applicants showed up.

The interview was routine. I called myself "Carl Shaner" on the application—keeping my first name as I always do—and claimed my only prior work experience was ten years as a shipper for the mythical Highsound Stereo Component Company in Baltimore. Employers don't expect falsified credentials and they almost never check out-of-state references.

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A big jowly guy named Salwak took my application. I answered the usual questions and did my best to create a good impression. I had deliberately undervalued myself on the application. That was the hook.

"According to this," Salwak said, "your last employer went out of business."

"Yes, that's true," I told him. "I couldn't find another job down home—it's that bad there—so I'm trying to make a new start here in Boston." I tried to sound down and out.

Salwak looked at the application again, then proceeded to fill me in on the company.

"We manufacture state of the art circuit boards. These boards are used in automatic testing equipment of all types. They are small, but very delicate and expensive. Your duties will be to help maintain our regular inventory and you will be responsible for shipping hardware to our customers."

"Sounds right up my alley," I said.

Salwak nodded. "The position starts at $3.40 an hour."

The ad had said $3.70 an hour.

"Fine," I said.

"In that case, Mr. Shaner," Salwak beamed, "I think you are exactly the individual we are looking for. You start tomorrow. Report to Mr. Roberts at the dock."

The next day I reported to Shipping and Receiving at eight sharp. Jerry Roberts, a bluff character who reminded me of a Keystone Cop, was in charge. The rest of the crew were a predictable bunch. Tony Cellini was the jokester of the group—there's one in every place. Lance Royston was quiet, black, and smart as a whip. He really should have been in charge, but the smart ones never are. If I ever retire from this game, I might write a book about the people I've worked with. They're part of what I enjoy about this.

I fitted in without any trouble. I always do. The work was easy. We were the low men on the Dyna totem pole, which didn't surprise me. Shipping and Receiving was in the basement, out of sight, and our loading dock was in the rear alley, which was below street level. Finished printed circuit boards—PC boards for short—came down to us in plastic bags for storage or shipping. Whatever went on upstairs, it didn't concern us much. The shipping crew kept apart from what Jerry called the "boy geniuses" upstairs. We didn't even eat in the company cafeteria. Instead, we ate at a neighborhood bar or sent out. That was how I first met Crazy Eddie.

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It was on my second day. The buzzer had announced lunch.

"Where are we eating today?" I asked Jerry.

"I sent out for it. Pizza. I hope you like it with onions and peppers."

"I can handle it," I grinned. The pizza arrived almost immediately, brought by a vacant-faced kid who might have been anywhere from 16 to 26. He handed the pizza to Tony and stuck out his hand, palm up.

"Hey, hey," he said. "Gimme a quarter."

"Here you go, Eddie."

The kid's eyes got wide and a sappy grin spread over his face He scooped up the coin with a pudgy hand. He turned to Lance next and repeated his demand. Lance gave him a quarter. So did Jerry. Then he came up to me.

"Gimme a quarter." His eyes were fish-gray. I hesitated.

"Go ahead, man," Lance said.

I dug into my pocket. The kid was grinning and bouncing on his feet. "C'mon, get it up. Get it up." He gave me the willies.

I pulled out a fifty-cent piece. "Here, take four bits," I said. Anything to get rid of him.

The kid took the coin, looked it over once, and dropped it in the alley dirt. "C'mon, get it up," he said again.

"Give Eddie a *quarter*," Tony told me. "He only takes quarters."

I fumbled out a quarter. He took it and skipped away, grinning and shaking the quarters in his cupped hands like a five-year-old.

"That's Crazy Eddie," Jerry told me as we sat on the dock to eat. "He's been in and out of institutions most of his life, but he's harmless. Goes around begging quarters off people—that's how he makes his living. When he's around, we send him out for food and pay him in quarters. He's sort of a tradition around here, so we try to take care of him."

"The reason he wouldn't take your fifty cents," Lance put in, "was because he doesn't understand money. He just knows that a quarter will buy him a candy bar, and that's all he cares about."

I picked up my half dollar and finished my lunch. "Crazy."

We saw Crazy Eddie about twice a week, and I sort of got used to his idiot grin. He has to be one of the strangest characters I've met in this game. If I ever write that book, I told myself, Crazy Eddie's going to be in it.

Yeah, he sure is.

It was at the end of the first week that I met John Grodin. John worked upstairs in Design, but he was a maverick and welcome in

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Shipping. He had lunch with us whenever he got fed up with the upstairs crowd. When he did, we would get in a few hands of poker.

I made a point of getting to know John. I liked him and he had the inside track at Dyna.

"Just what do you do up there all day, John?" I asked.

Most people don't show much interest in what others do for a living. Consequently, when someone does, the floodgates open.

John launched into a long explanation of how he mocked up PC board designs with mylar sheets and pressure-sensitive tape to simulate circuitry. The boards were used the way computers are used to test car performance. John designed the custom boards for special equipment, he told me.

"Worth a lot of money?" I asked.

"The regular boards you guys store aren't worth more than a few hundred dollars each, but some of the custom PC boards cost heavy bread, let me tell you. I'm working on a design now that will be worth a cool five grand."

I whistled. "What do you make them out of—platinum?"

"No, the parts are just fiberglass and copper solder." John got a board and took it out of its plastic bag. It was about the size of a ruler, except that it was made out of green plastic.

"See how thin these circuit lines are? The tolerances are unbelievable. This is art."

"Are these things worth anything to anyone outside of the companies you make them for?"

"Sure," John said. "Any number of people would love to get their hands on some of our designs. Some other computer outfit who can't afford our boards. Or our competition. A thief could do well for himself if he had connections in the industry."

I smiled to myself. I had hopes of being that thief.

The weeks slid by and I slipped into the routine. The work was simple. The regular stock boards were kept in a locked storage cage. The custom jobs, when they were being held before shipping, were kept in individual combination lockers in another cage. I knew all the combinations—it was my job.

In the meantime I pumped the others as much as I could. It was Jerry's job to lock up at night, so I learned about the alarm and where the keys were kept. From Lance I found out that the night security guard mainly patrolled the upper floors. The Dyna Corporation was shaping up very nicely.

One night I checked out the place under actual "working" con-

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ditions. I entered the alley behind Dyna after eleven on a Saturday night, walking at a quick pace past the dim bulbs glowing over the rows of loading platforms and service doors—as if I had taken a wrong turn and was anxious to find my way back. It looked perfectly deserted. Then a foot kicked a pebble somewhere in front of me and a voice said, "Hey, hey!"

I froze. There was someone there I couldn't make out in the dark. When he said, "Get it up," I recognized Crazy Eddie's voice. Sure enough, he stepped into the dim light.

I let out a pent breath. "Hi, Eddie."

"Gimme a quarter," he grinned. I flipped him a quarter. He caught it and went past me. He didn't say thank you—he never does. I got out of that alley in a hurry, making a mental note to carry a quarter for Crazy Eddie—just in case—when the job became ripe.

I had been there almost seven weeks when the opportunity of a lifetime came. I almost didn't take it. I hadn't set up a fence yet and, worse, I hadn't put in my three months. I always put in at least three months before I make my move. Paying my dues, so to speak.

It happened over lunch. John Grodin came down looking harried.

"Just finished five board designs for a jet-engine test unit," he informed me. "Man, were they *tough*. I figure that by the time they add up all the costs of redesigning and experimentation, those boards will cost the contractor $25,000 each."

I munched on my burger to cover my excitement. Throwing in some of the random stock, I could walk off with more than $150,000 in the trunk of my car. I could worry about a fence later.

"When are they going out?" I asked John. Everything depended on his answer.

"Tomorrow morning. They're being loaded and inspected now. You should have them by three for packing."

The boards came down at 2:30. They didn't look any different from any of the zillion other boards that had passed through my hands, but the amber plastic and copper circuitry might as well have been solid gold. I stored them carefully.

When five o'clock came, I pretended to misplace a shipping form. I told the others to go ahead, that I would lock up. Just like that. Why not? I was a trusted co-worker. They didn't know it was good-bye, not good night.

I disconnected the alarm first. Then I punched out, shut off the lights, and left by the service door, taking the ring of keys that hung beside it with me.

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I drove home wearing a grin as big as Crazy Eddie's.

I had dinner, watched the news, and waited. It was going to be a cinch. Only one thing bothered me—I hadn't put in my three months' time. I was superstitious about that, but I put it out of my mind. If I unloaded those boards right, I could be in Las Vegas inside of a month. I always went to Vegas after a job.

At ten o'clock I eased my car into the alley behind Dyna and parked beside the dock. I got in through the service door with the key.

Once inside, it was just a matter of unlocking the storage cages and working the combination lockers. I carried the five special boards out first. Then I got the rest of the custom boards and some of the inventory stock. Everything fitted into the trunk.

I reset the alarm, replaced the keys, and shut the service door behind me. Simple, no? Yes, but I had put in almost two months at Dyna to make it that simple. The whole thing had taken 20 minutes. I made for the car, feeling only a little tightness in my gut.

Then the alley turned white with light. I ducked instinctively. A prowl car had turned the corner, moving slowly with its flashers off.

No time to start the car. I ran. Car doors slammed open and shut behind me. Heavy feet pounded. I heard a shout as I cut around a corner.

Damn the luck! They must have been late on their regular patrol. I ducked into a passage between two buildings, and around a corner. Breathing more from nerves than effort, I stopped to get my bearings.

A voice from the shadows said, "Get it up!" and my heart stopped.

Then I recognized that voice. It was Crazy Eddie, a foolish grin on his loose face and his white hand outstretched. "Hey, hey! Gimme a quarter," he demanded. I couldn't have been more scared if those two cops had jumped out of the shadows.

The heavy feet sounded again. I got an idea. Then I felt sick. I had forgotten to check my change! I dug into my pocket frantically, finally pulled out a quarter by feel.

"Here, Eddie. When those cops come, tell them I went the other way, understand?" Eddie nodded vacantly. Running the opposite way, I turned into a blind alley. I waited, listening, my gut like a drum. Crazy Eddie would steer the cops the other way and I'd be home free—maybe I could get back to the car.

I heard a voice order, "Hold it!"

"Wait, Joe. It's Crazy Eddie. He's okay. Hey, Eddie, did you see

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a guy run this way? Yeah? Which way did he go?"

Crazy Eddie mumbled something I couldn't hear, but I did hear the cops trot away. It worked. I waited some more, then peered out. Crazy Eddie was still standing there. He looked confused, but he didn't matter any more. I legged down the street and around the corner.

The two cops were waiting for me with guns drawn. "Right there, buddy," one of them ordered. I put my hands up—there was nothing else to do. They frisked me against a wall and read me my rights. Crazy Eddie came to watch. When I saw his face, I knew he'd tipped them off.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" I yelled at him. "I gave you your damn quarter! Why'd you do it?"

One of the cops looked at me funny. The other one told him, "Crazy Eddie will do almost anything for a quarter, but he has no use for any other kind of money." He walked down the street, and came back with something shiny he'd picked off the pavement.

"Looks like you made a common mistake, pal." He held up a Susan B. Anthony silver dollar to the light.

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HOJ068

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John Briggs's first story, "Smith and Carp," appeared in the February 1978 issue of EQMM. It was described as an offbeat story of counterespionage. Well, Mr. Briggs's second story is a different battle of wits—about the long-standing duel between Alibi Ike and Detective Nowicki . . .

THE PERFECT ALIBI

by JOHN BRIGGS

I'm pretty nervous now, so I ask the bartender for another whiskey sour and then I start to write what I guess you could call my last will and testament.

Dear Detective Nowicki,

As an expert in the field of murder myself, I can pretty well assure you that I'll be dead by the time you read this. —"Gunned Down!" the papers will print—and I hope they give you nausea by listing me as an innocent victim. In fact, I hope my murder gives you as much grief in one week as I've managed to give you in all the sixteen years we've—shall I say?—known each other.

I've got a question for you, Nowicki. I've always wondered, was it you who started calling me "Alibi Ike"? If it was, you must be laughing now. But I was good, wasn't I? The best. I perfected the art of the alibi. I brought it to a new height.

In 1964, when I was just getting out of college and you were only a cocky patrolman, you nailed me and told me I was sure going to need a good alibi. Was being at the Governor's luncheon for honor graduates good enough? Or maybe you liked '67 when I got that banker right in the middle of your home turf. Was being in Vietnam at the time good enough, Mr. Detective? Or how about '73 when I was on television at the time of the murder? And then in Queens in '76, when you were so sure you had me until—

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Oh, well, I'd like to list even more, Nowicki, but I don't think I have time. The boys outside are getting their guts up and my reputation's not going to keep them off much longer.

And speaking of reputations, I sure had yours wrong, even after all these years. I'd always pegged you as dead-honest and straight by the book—a good hard-working cop without an ounce of imagination. Only this time you did just fine, Nowicki, because this is cute. Real cute. I didn't think you had it in you.

But while I still have a little time to write, let's keep one thing clear, Nowicki. I had you. I had you just like always. For a stinking two grand—big gambling tabs forced me to work cheap, but you already know all about that, don't you?—I killed the runner who stole the bookie's thirty thousand. I knew you'd be after me first thing and I also knew that, since the body would never be seen again—I can promise you that—the stolen money itself would be my biggest danger as evidence.

So what was I to do with it? Giving it back to the bookie would make your case a cinch and I sure couldn't keep it myself. Hiding the money or destroying it meant I would have to hide or destroy it myself, and that was much too risky. I ended up by going back to a basic theory I've always believed in—that you should try to turn the most dangerous evidence against you into the strongest part of your alibi.

And so, Mr. Smart Detective, I fixed it so you would recover the money in such a way and in such a place that it would have been impossible for me to have been involved with the money or to have done the killing.

It was perfect, Nowicki—I got the money to you and then *you* became my alibi. Without the money, you had no link connecting me to the supposed crime; but with you having the money, there was no way for *me* to be guilty.

Perfect! I couldn't stop laughing!

I began to wonder, then, what would Detective Nowicki, that honest cop, do with the cash? Thirty thousand isn't chicken feed. Maybe you'd put it in trust to be brought out when I confessed under the terrible pressure of my conscience? Hah! My own hope, Nowicki, was that your two kids would suddenly be able to afford Harvard. If it went that way, I was going to invite you to dinner, toast your new life, and suggest a partnership. Not really, of course.

Yes, Nowicki, I laughed a lot thinking about what you could possibly do with that loot, since the moment you turned it in offi-

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cially, your case was gone. I thought of everything you might do with it. I figured every angle, every move.

Except one. I never figured you'd pay my tab to that Vegas casino.

And so I'm dead. When word got back that a two-thousand-dollar hit had been enough for me to pay an eighteen-thousand-dollar debt, my clients rushed to check out my alibi. Now they're dead-certain I doublecrossed them in return for enough of a split to pay my debt. I sort of wish now I could produce that body.

And of course, Nowicki, only you and I know that I didn't double-cross them, that I really did carry out their contract. Like I said, you must be laughing your head off.

In a few minutes they'll come and I'll say to them, "I killed that guy, I really did. Believe me, willya?"

But they won't. I really do have the perfect alibi and there's no way out.

Goodbye, cop. I hope you croak.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

BOUCHERCON XI: The 11th Annual Anthony Boucher Memorial Mystery & Detection Literature Convention—or to put it simply, Bouchercon XI—will be held in Washington, D.C., on Columbus Day weekend, October 10–12. This year's guest of honor is Gregory Mcdonald, Edgar-winning author of *Fletch, Confess, Fletch,* and other popular mysteries. Peter E. Blau and Jon L. Lellenberg, co-chairmen of the event, promise a program featuring other prominent mystery writers, scholars, and critics of the genre, FBI and CIA agents, editors, and fans. Membership fee for the entire weekend of events at the National Press Club, 14th and F Streets, is just $15.00, with one-day memberships also offered. Hotel accommodations are available nearby.

Though they haven't yet attracted the thousands of fans who flock to science-fiction conventions, the annual Bouchercons have become a popular mystery institution over the past decade. This year's is the first to be held in Washington. Previous sites have included the Los Angeles area (five times), Boston, Oakland, Chicago (twice), and New York. The 1981 convention is tentatively planned for Milwaukee.

Anyone wishing to register or obtain further details of this year's gathering should write: Bouchercon XI, 1299 National Press Building, Washington, D.C. 20045.

FILM FESTIVAL: At just about the time you're reading these words, September 9–14, the First International Mystery Film Festival will be under way at the Italian resort town of Cattolica, not far from Venice. It opens one day after the close of the prestigious Venice Film Festival. All mystery films not yet released in Italy are eligible for selection, and awards will be given for best direction, screenplay, and male and female performances.

In addition to the main program of a dozen new mystery films, there will be screenings of television mysteries, panel discussions, and a retrospective "Philip Marlowe Festival," bringing together eight films drawn from the novels of Raymond Chandler. Final event of the festival will be a showing of Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train,* which had a screenplay by Chandler.

SHERLOCKIANA: A recent book

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of odd facts, *Would You Believe This, Too?* (Sterling Publishing Co.), reports that a London insurance company located at 22A Baker Street [sic] employs someone full-time to answer letters addressed to Sherlock Holmes at that address.

LOST MYSTERIES: This month's "lost" mysteries, long out of print in this country and deserving of revival, are two novels by Hake Talbot, *The Hangman's Handyman* (1942) and *Rim of the Pit* (1944). In these two books Talbot came close to emulating the success of John Dickson Carr and Clayton Rawson with the locked-room and impossible-crime puzzle, managing to combine the supernatural atmosphere of Carr with the bizarre magic tricks of Rawson. Talbot's gambler detective, Rogan Kincaid, also appeared in one short story, in the old *Mystery Book Magazine.*

"Hake Talbot" was the pseudonym of Henning Nelms, born in Baltimore in 1900. He was last known to be residing in Washington, D.C. in 1972, when *Rim of the Pit* was published for the first time in England.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: The Octopus/Heinemann omnibus series, which I reported on last month, will add six new titles in October, including omnibuses of suspense novels by popular writers Ian Fleming, Victoria Holt, and Helen MacInnes.

The Helen MacInnes omnibus, containing *Assignment in Brittany* and three later books, will coincide with the publication of her nineteenth novel, *The Hidden Target,* due from Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in October.

Also in October, Gregg Press will add six new titles to its series of hardcover mystery reprints, joining twenty-five titles already in print. The new books are Anthony Boucher's *The Case of the Baker Street Irregulars* (1940), Dorothy Salisbury Davis's *A Gentle Murderer* (1951), Edgar Lustgarten's *One More Unfortunate* (1947), Ross Macdonald's *The Dark Tunnel* (1944), Raoul Whitfield's *Green Ice* (1930), and Cornell Woolrich's rare 1932 novel *Manhattan Love Song.*

Having edited two successful collections of science-fiction short-short stories, Isaac Asimov, Martin Harry Greenberg, and Joseph D. Olander have now turned their attention to the mystery. Their newest anthology, *Miniature Mysteries: 100 Delicious Little Murders,* will be published by Taplinger this fall.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Ordinarily this column would ignore or deal sternly with spoofs, but *Dinner with Adele*—a film from Czechoslovakia previously known as *Nick Carter in Prague*—is up to such sweet mischief it wins one's heart. At the turn of the century, Nick, "America's greatest detec-

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tive," already an international figure with a celebrity following (in his New York office we spot an autographed photo from fan Sherlock Holmes and a note by Thomas Edison: "Your advice made me see the light"), and the constant target of thugs and assassins, is called to the crooked streets and Art Nouveau palaces of Prague by its local police chief to investigate "the crime of the century"—the mysterious disappearance of Countess Thunova's beloved Gert.

Gert, as Nick learns with some consternation upon his arrival at the ancient, wondrous city, is a Great Dane. But, being gallant as well as fearless and awesomely brilliant, Carter goes on with the case, dogged by a beer-drinking, sausage-devouring police inspector assigned to him as an assistant. At every turn blind beggars, sewer workers, street artists, midget bellhops, and others spy on the detective, for, as he probes deeper into the Prague underworld he comes closer to "The Gardener," a botany-minded master criminal mistakenly thought dead, who now resides in the city, under the respectable title of Baron Rupert von Kratzmar, with his carnivorous plant Adele. The huge, weaving orchid has already made dogfood of Gert and now hungers for Nick, the heroine, or any other morsel dropping into the Baron's cellar garden.

But the suave, unflappable Carter—so much the gentleman that his method of torturing the villainess into revealing information is snipping one by one the plumes off her Paris hat—is nothing if not resourceful. Employing up-to-that-minute crime-fighting devices invented for him by pals Roentgen, Nobel, Laser, and Edison, pursuing his nemesis by automobile and balloon, the square-jawed, superbly confident detective (often disguised) manages to outwit his archenemy and uproot Adele in a lunatic lark of a sparkling film. A parody of high invention and wit, *Dinner with Adele* is like tasteful Mel Brooks, Clouseau without pratfalls, a gourmet feast of laughter gently spoofing America's first penny mysteries.

For the record, the French were the first to use the Nick Carter character in silent-film serials, and tough-guy Eddie Constantine was to portray him—in trenchcoat—in France in the 1960s. Nick had already made an appearance in American silent films; starting in 1939 the dapper Walter Pidgeon became Nick Carter, Master Detective, for three films, tackling mainly spies and saboteurs. Nick Carter was also one of radio's most durable detectives, his mystery show lasting for years. Another program featured his adopted teenage son Chick, which also evolved into a film serial. More recently (1972), Robert Conrad starred as Carter in a television feature pilot which for the first time placed the detective in a period setting. It allowed him to don disguises and track thugs through New York's Tenderloin, but did not become a series.

London's tradition-haunted Palladium Theater, famous the world over, has a new attraction to be found—as one might in the Paris Opera House of *The Phantom of the Opera*—in the tunnels underneath. The Palladium Cellars, brainchild of Michael Carreras of Hammer Films, is beyond question the most inven-

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tive waxworks of modern times. The voice of actor Valentine Dyall, famed as England's wartime radio "Man in Black," beckons you in and downward, past the street thieves of an Oliver Twist tableau, and you begin your journey through a dark world of shrouded British mystery, past figures which glow and move and speak (and scream).

To the left, a glimpse of Jack the Ripper at work, crouched in an alley leading to a foggy Thames dock. To the right, Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett industriously sell pies in Fleet Street. A caged werewolf rattles his bars, begging you for release. The ghost of a murdered king recites Shakespeare, a talking skull recites Poe. Turning a corner we are with archeologists at an excavation, a wall of the tomb ominously opening; turning another corner we find Dr. Jekyll in his cluttered study, his face turning as he talks to us into Mr. Hyde and back again (thanks to an ingenious new process: a hidden holographic projector casts a tridimensional image on the blank head of a dummy). We scurry quickly past the abbey garden where Dracula lurks, the crumpled body of one victim dripping blood into a pool; as the vampire raises his head, his eyes burn red. There is really much else, from gorgons to shoot-outs in a prohibition Chicago street, guns blazing; the Palladium Cellars have vaultsful of restless spirits.

London has much to interest the mystery ambler, from Madame Tussaud's traditional chamber of horrors to Sherlock Holmes's streets and Edgar Wallace's pub. Though expensive these days (inexpensive airlines such as World and Laker are currently cutting down that cost) the city has much to offer—including the best in wax displays: the prize-winning London Dungeons near London Bridge, the Palladium Cellars, and even the Metropolitan Police 150th Birthday exhibit, which you enter through a turn-of-the-century police callbox! Only don't get caught at any of them after midnight.

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INTERVIEW: RUTH RENDELL (1)

This is the first part of an interview that will be concluded in the next issue.

EQMN: Few writers are as successful in the long and short form, and in the detective as well as the general suspense genre as you. Do you have a preference as to length and/or genre?

RENDELL: A lot of my success depends on the character of Chief Inspector Wexford, who created himself back in the winter of 1963 and who, I think, I unconsciously based on my own father. But if ever a character created himself Wexford did, unfolding himself onto the page really without, as far as I can remember, much pushing or inventing on my part. Wexford is a very nice man, but acidulous and dry too and with lots of sensitivity and imagination. Men identify with him and women

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see him as an ideal husband—in spite of all his shortcomings, work-wise, as a husband.

My detective stories aren't in any way remarkable, they're just ordinary classic detective stories, but they do have Wexford. We hear a lot these days about people being greedy for more and more violence, but people tell me they like Wexford because he's never brutal, never callous or cruel.

The fact is, though, that the detective story isn't my favorite genre either for reading or writing. Best of all I like writing the suspense novel, such as my *The Face of Trespass* or *Make Death Love Me.* Doing character and what goes on in people's conscious and unconscious minds is what appeals most to me. I like reading that sort of novel and it's true to say I like writing what I most enjoy reading. In the short form I best like writing atmosphere stories like "Almost Human" or the longer "Thornapple." I must confess not much to enjoy writing the long short Wexford stories. Mostly I write for me and not my public, but in this case I'm responding to all those people who write and ask me for more and more Wexford.

EQMN: Your work reflects never-ending interests, intellectual curiosity, and exceptional imagination. Do you recall manifestations of this in your childhood and anyone who especially influenced you?

RENDELL: I'll sound like a woman with a father-fixation soon. In fact, my late father and I frequently disagreed and riled each other—we were too much alike—but there's no doubt that if I have never-ending interests I owe this to him. And to a slightly lesser extent to my mother. I was brought up in a household where it was taken for granted one would be interested in everything that came one's way. Both my parents painted, my mother wrote poetry, she was an excellent needlewoman, they both read books all the time. My father was a geologist, but he spent some of his leisure inventing or solving mathematical problems, doing crosswords, making engines and setting them going over our gas stove, glass-blowing, working metal, cabinet-making, and he was a wonderful gardener. I was always encouraged to collect things, to make things, to learn and to read. What intellectual curiosity I may have stems from my parents' stimulus.

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Question: What do politics and mystery writing have in common? Answer: More of their practitioners have been drawn from the ranks of law than any other profession.

Though the above claim is not based on a scientific survey, it does seem a likely guess. Going at least as far back as Wilkie Collins, lawyers have been making a major contribution to crime and detective fiction. Among the names that spring to mind are M. McDonnell Bodkin, Erle Stanley Gardner, Cyril Hare, Henry

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Cecil, Harold Q. Masur, Henry Kane, George V. Higgins, Miles Tripp, Joe L. Hensley, and Francis M. Nevins, Jr. This month's top three are all the work of English lawyers, including the latest by one of the greatest of all crime-spinning solicitors.

**** Michael Gilbert: *The Killing of Katie Steelstock,* Harper and Row, $10.95. The local girl who made good (as a London TV star) is murdered during a small-town dance. Gilbert follows a large cast of various generations through the police investigation and subsequent legal proceedings with his customary command of character and procedural detail. The final revelation is genuinely surprising without undermining the feeling of authenticity. This is Gilbert at his best.

*** Michael Underwood: *A Clear Case of Suicide,* St. Martin's, $8.95. Here is one of the rarest of mystery types: the pure whydunit. Special Branch Officer Richard Deegan tries to discover the reason for his barrister-father's suicide—and contrary to the natural mystery reader's skepticism, that it *is* suicide is never questioned. This is an extremely involving piece of storytelling with a satisfactory (if not precisely electrifying) windup.

*** Roy Lewis: *An Uncertain Sound,* St. Martin's, $8.95. A British veteran only occasionally published in this country offers a sound and neatly plotted thriller about a solicitor whose world (marriage and business) starts to come apart in a chaos of murder and corruption. It's a Patrick Quentinish tale of a man in trouble, interestingly peopled and neatly resolved.

*** Michael Collins: *The Slasher,* Dodd, Mead, $7.95. Bringing New York private eye Dan Fortune to California (including Santa Barbara) makes the latest Collins sound more than ever like a Ross Macdonald, though lighter on similes and heavier on violence. Collins' novels have to work on an emotional level or they don't work at all—this one does.

*** Thomas H. Cook: *Blood Innocents,* Playboy Press, $2.25. Cook matches the latest (and one of the more interesting) in a long line of New York serial killers against aging homicide dick Reardon, nearing retirement and recently bereaved. First comes the slaughter of two fallow deer in the Central Park Children's Zoo, then the equally bloody and obviously connected demise of two young lesbian women. Cook's first novel is sensitively written and enthralling throughout.

*** John Wainwright: *Eye of the Beholder,* St. Martin's, $8.95. The versatile Wainwright enters the Clayton Rawson-Walter B. Gibson world of professional magicians and keeps the reader guessing to the last about who poisoned the wheelchair occupant once known as the Great Gordano. As always, the slangy, overwrought prose walks a thin line. The author's fans will like it, but this is probably not the Wainwright to read first.

*** Ellis Peters: *One Corpse Too Many,* Morrow, $8.95. The second novel about monk-detective Brother Cadfael is a well wrought historical mystery with a dramatic, swashbuckling climax. If I found it less entertaining than the author's present-day mysteries about the Felse family, it may be that I find the medieval period less interesting than most.

*** Leo Bruce: *Case with Rope and*

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Rings, Academy Chicago Limited, 360 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60601, $9.95. In a novel first published in Britain in 1949, Bruce carries the air of artificiality to an extreme that will delight some readers and madden others. At one point, we even have the spectacle of Sergeant Beef arguing with his Watson (the comically stuffy Townsend) about the royalties to some of the books about his cases, and Townsend's concern throughout is how the whole thing will look on paper. The stunt solution is one that would not work in any other context. (The distributor offers several other Sergeant Beef novels in uniform format, including the minor classic *Case for Three Detectives*, first published in 1936.)

*** Vincent McConnor: *The Provence Puzzle,* Macmillan, $9.95. Chief Inspector Damiot of the Paris police, a familiar sleuth to *EQMM* readers here making his book-length debut, revisits the village of his boyhood to recover from a shooting injury and becomes involved in a bizarre local mystery. A great deal goes on —detection, romance, special effects, and some rather grey-bearded melodrama—and the result on balance is a highly entertaining story. More Damiot novels are promised.

** Mary Higgins Clark: *The Cradle Will Fall,* Simon and Schuster, $10.95. Evil gynecologist pursues girl-who-saw-too-much. The coincidental interconnections of the characters strain credibility from the first, and the predictable finale seems equally over-orchestrated. In between, the rudimentary plot and conventional characters and development are Writ Large in typical best-seller fashion. The novel is well written and skilfully paced, though it leaves an overall impression of talent that should have been deployed on a better, more original story.

One of the better-known Sherlockian scholars has turned his magnifying glass away from the works of Doyle—but not far. Trevor H. Hall's *Dorothy L. Sayers: Nine Literary Studies,* Archon-Shoe String, 995 Sherman Avenue, Hamden, CT 06514, $19.50, is least interesting when drawing some rather obvious parallels between Wimsey and Holmes, Sayers and Doyle, but utterly fascinating when exploring the lives and careers of Sayers' husband, Atherton Fleming, and her collaborator, Robert Eustace, the shadowy figure who also wrote detective fiction with L. T. Meade and Edgar Jepson.

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"Q"

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a ***NEW*** detective story by

STEPHEN WASYLYK

Brendan Magillon was "one of those naturally funny people . . . complete extrovert, very popular." At the Country Club's Annual Amateur Night he performed a magic act, and at least one member thought he "knocked them dead" . . .

MIDDLE-OF-THE-NIGHT CALL

by STEPHEN WASYLYK

In the moonlight that silvered the flat fairways on either side of the highway, the twin rows of tall Lombardy poplars were dark slender sentinels marking the lane that led to the clubhouse of the Meridian Country Club. A string of headlights beneath the poplars pointed at a lone patrol car parked at the intersection like a cork in a bottle; red and blue roof lights were a flashing beacon in the night for Hoke Beckett.

He made the turn, pulled up behind the police car, and sat for a moment, a heavy weariness pulling at him and a vague, indefinite ache somewhere in his legs. Hell, he thought as he pushed open the door, I'm getting too old for these middle-of-the-night calls.

At the two-seater Mercedes parked on the other shoulder a uniformed man, squat in the moonlight, lifted a heavy-duty lantern and turned the beam through the lowered car window.

"This is how we found him, Lieutenant."

The driver was tall and slim and wearing a dinner jacket. The bullet had driven him sideways so that he slumped toward the passenger's seat, and the wound in his neck indicated a large caliber pistol.

Beckett reached in and patted the man's chest.

"When we got here, the engine was running and the lights were

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on," said the uniformed man. "It looks like he pulled to the side and rolled down the window to talk to someone who pushed a gun at him and pulled the trigger. His name is Brendan Magillon and he was a club member. One of the other members found him, drove back to the clubhouse, and had the manager call it in." He waved a hand at the string of cars that had been prevented from leaving, their occupants a silent audience. "What do we do with these people?"

"Let them go," said Beckett wearily. "Interviewing them tonight isn't my idea of a good time, and since this is a private club we can find any of them if we need them, which isn't likely since they seem to have arrived after the thing was done. Spocker will be here shortly. He'll handle this end of it. When he's through, tell him to meet me in the clubhouse."

"Someone could have parked near here, waiting, figuring that hitting one of the club members would be a good score." The policeman indicated the highway. "Be out of sight in a minute or two."

Beckett nodded. "That's possible. This isn't the most expensive country club in the county, but the members aren't poverty-stricken. It's a good bet that any will have a few dollars on him at any given time, but the man's wallet is still in his breast pocket. If that's what the shooter was after, he didn't take it."

He nosed his car up the lane past the stares of the dinner-jacketed men and the gowned women with their wraps pulled close around them.

Saturday night party, he thought, as the road curved gently and climbed. To either side of him the broad fairways of the golf course gleamed in the moonlight, while ahead, the windows of the long low clubhouse flickered through a screen of tall pines.

He parked to one side of the clubhouse portico, fatigue making him irritable. An attendant, red-jacketed, young and blond, trotted up.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you can't leave your car there. If you'll give me the keys—"

"Leave it," snapped Beckett. "Have you been on duty all night?"

"Uh, oh." The kid stiffened. "You'd think I'd know a cop when I saw one. Yeah, I was on. So was Joe."

"Did you see Mr. Magillon leave?"

"I brought his car around myself." The kid coughed. "I hear he's dead."

"He's dead. Do you know how to write?"

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The kid bristled. "What kind of question is that? I'm a university student."

"That's no guarantee these days. While I'm inside, you and Joe make a list, as nearly as you can remember, of people who left before Magillon, or about the same time."

Inside the clubhouse an open door labeled *Manager* revealed a man behind a desk—elderly, short and bald, wearing a too-tight dinner jacket.

"I'm Lieutenant Beckett," Hoke said.

"Duncan Kane," said the manager. "I've been expecting you." He lifted a bottle of Scotch and eyed Beckett inquiringly.

Beckett shook his head. Kane poured himself a small drink and gulped it down as if he needed it. "Who found the body?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Leclare. I asked them to wait in the bar." Kane shook his head. "It's a terrible thing, isn't it? Leclare said that Magillon had been shot. A holdup?"

"That remains to be seen. Looks like you had a party here tonight."

"Our Annual Amateur Night. One of the entertainment committee's more successful efforts, probably because the talent that people possess is always a surprise. Magillon, for instance—" He broke off.

"Magillon what?"

"I started to say he knocked them dead," said Kane ruefully, "but the expression is hardly appropriate under the circumstances. Magillon was one of those naturally funny people. An excellent sense of humor and a complete extrovert, very popular among the members. He put together a magic act, or perhaps I should say a parody of a magic act, one of those things where everything goes wrong, nothing works, and all the tricks are obvious. It was very funny."

Kane poured himself another drink and Beckett realized it wasn't his second of the night. Irritation flickered again. Great, he thought. I can always use a drunken source of information.

"I don't suppose you can really tell me anything that might help."

Kane shrugged. "After all, the crime was committed almost a mile away." He rose unsteadily. "I'll take you to the Leclares."

Beckett motioned him down. "Just relax. I've been here before."

In the dimly lit barroom a young couple and a middle-aged one sat at tables while a lone man slumped on a stool, talking to a disinterested bartender who stood with folded arms. Both couples looked up at Beckett expectantly. The middle-aged woman, heavy, wearing a flowing pink gown, her hair carefully dyed and arranged, twisted a handkerchief nervously.

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As he approached her table, the man, tall and silver-haired, rose and nodded. "I'm Spencer Leclare. You're—?"

"Lieutenant Beckett. Tell me what happened."

"There isn't much to tell. As we came down the lane to the highway I noticed Magillon's car on the shoulder. Assuming he had car trouble, I stopped to help. When I walked up to him I could see he was slouched in the seat. I thought perhaps he was ill, or had too much to drink. I spoke to him first, then reached in to shake him." Leclare rubbed his fingers together, a slight tinge of horror on his face. "I felt something wet on his neck and I realized it was blood. I immediately drove back to the clubhouse and told Kane to call you people."

"Did you see any cars ahead of you as you came down the lane?"

"No," said Mrs. Leclare. "You might say we were leading the pack because that fool kid Harry stalled our car in the driveway when he brought it around and couldn't get it started, so everyone piled up behind us." She turned to her husband. "The club really ought to widen that driveway. You should speak to the committee."

Leclare's eyes found Beckett's. "It was a holdup, wasn't it? I had an idea something like that might happen one of these days."

"Why?"

"One night two weeks ago I noticed a car parked on the shoulder of the highway when I stopped to see if the highway was clear. When I pulled out, it fell in behind. I had the feeling it was following me, so when I reached the little town down the road I made a few turns. It *was* following me, but the driver must have realized I was on to him because he suddenly turned away."

"Did you report it to the police?"

"What for? At that point they could do nothing."

"True, but a patrol car could have been sent to keep an eye on that lane. Has anyone else had the same experience?"

"Several people." Leclare shook his head. "Stupid, isn't it? None of us had the sense to report it. If we had, Magillon might still be alive."

He glanced at his wife. "Good Lord. Carl Yarborough."

She sighed. "The poor man."

"Who is Carl Yarborough?"

"One of the people who noticed the car. He was also a close friend of Magillon's. Same golf foursome, you know."

"Unlucky foursome," said Mrs. Leclare.

"Why?" asked Beckett.

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"One of them, a man named Dukes, had a nervous breakdown last week. He's in the hospital. Now Magillon is dead."

"Which leaves Yarborough and who else?"

"Dr. Wister. Jerry Wister." She turned to her husband. "Jerry left as soon as the show was over because he wanted to get up early, and Yarborough followed because his wife had stayed home with a bad cold and he wanted to get back to her. So I suppose neither of them knows about Magillon yet."

Beckett surreptitiously stretched his legs under the table, hoping to ease the vague ache. He realized that Mrs. Leclare was one of those people who require a little time to warm up before talking non-stop, decided he was in no mood for that, and pushed his chair back.

"It's late, so I won't keep you. Please stop by the municipal building sometime tomorrow and we'll put your statement on paper."

Leaving her look of disappointment behind, he walked toward the bar. The young couple had gone and the remaining patron seemed to have stopped talking in mid-sentence and was asleep. The bartender watched Beckett approach and shrugged. "I'll wake him in fifteen minutes when we close, but in the meantime he may sleep enough of it off to be able to drive. Anything I can get you?"

Beckett cleared a throat that had become tight and scratchy and pointed to a pot of coffee behind the bar. "The hotter and stronger the better."

"That's the only way we make it." The bartender slid a cup toward him. "Too bad about Magillon."

The hot coffee spread warmth, but it did nothing to erase the weariness. "I understand he was well liked."

"There are people who won't regret his passing, which is something you can say about any man."

"Which means?"

"Magillon liked to play practical jokes, which is fine as long as you exhibit a little judgment when selecting your victim. He wasn't that considerate. A few days ago he used a quick-setting epoxy cement to glue a member's expensive dress shoes to his locker floor. A variation on an old joke but he pulled it on the wrong man. Burns is a young guy, not too long out of college. He has a wife and a couple of nice kids. Membership dues here have to take a big bite out of his income.

"The point is, there are plenty of people here who wouldn't blink at having a pair of expensive shoes ruined, but Burns isn't one of

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them, so I don't suppose he'll be unhappy to hear Magillon is dead."

Beckett finished his coffee. "Many people feel that way?"

"Magillon's been playing jokes since he joined the club a year ago."

A stocky man appeared in the doorway of the bar, spotted Beckett, and came forward. "All clear out there, Hoke. The body has gone to the M.E. and the car is on the way to the impound yard."

"Anything unusual turn up?"

Spocker shook his head. "Nothing you don't already know."

Beckett slid off the stool. The ache was now centered somewhere in his lower back. "The manager must have a membership list. Leave it on my desk. I'll get it in the morning."

Spocker nodded. "Anything else?"

Beckett indicated the man slumped at the bar. "See that Sleeping Beauty here gets home. I wouldn't want him driving."

As he went through the door, Harry, the young parking-lot attendant, jumped from the retaining wall where he had been sitting and handed him a slip of paper.

"Here's your list."

Beckett slid it into his pocket. "Been driving long?"

"What—?" Harry's eyes shifted. "I see the Leclares have been talking."

He looked so shame-faced that Beckett felt sorry for him.

He slid behind the wheel and drove down the tree-lined lane, more tired than ever, looking forward to the bed he had left an hour before.

Damn, he thought, I *am* getting old.

The membership roster was centered neatly on his desk in the morning. He placed the scrawled list that Harry had given him beside it. Harry's list was short, no more than half a dozen names, Yarborough's and Wister's among them. Beckett was comparing them when a slight vertigo that had been coming and going since he arose that morning hit him and he closed his eyes for a moment.

I'll stick it out for a few more hours, he told himself. By then I'll have gone as far as I can go with this thing.

He tucked the lists into his pocket and walked out.

He drove to the address listed for Yarborough, a small red-brick Colonial with a white porch and a short driveway, walked up the driveway, and punched the bell.

The watery-eyed woman who peered through the space allowed

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by the safety chain was young and blonde, one hand clutching her robe to her throat.

Beckett held out his I.D. "My name is Beckett. I'd like to talk to your husband."

She dabbed at a red nose with a tissue. "He's not here. Is it about Magillon? A friend called us last night. I still can't believe it."

"Yes, it's about Magillon. Where is your husband?"

"At Mel Dukes's apartment. The doctor asked him to bring some things to the hospital that Mel can use."

"Dukes is the man who had the breakdown?"

She nodded. "Carl is his best friend. They were in college together and since Mel's wife left him, he doesn't have anyone. Only Carl." She lifted the chain. "You can wait."

Beckett smiled. "Go back to bed and take care of your cold. I'll try to catch him at Dukes's apartment. If I miss him, I'll be back."

Beckett consulted the membership list, drove down the road to a garden type apartment complex he had passed, found the building he wanted, climbed the stairs, and tapped at the door of Dukes's apartment.

Waiting, he felt something under his shoe, moved his foot, and saw a glass-headed push pin, one of those available in almost every stationery, variety, or hardware store for fastening papers to bulletin boards, the pin protruding from his sole. He pulled it free. Caught on the needle-sharp point was a piece of black fuzz. Almost automatically Beckett glanced at the door, assuming Dukes had used it to pin up some sort of message, but the surface of the door was smooth and unbroken. He looked around, saw no place to dispose of the pin, and not wanting someone else to step on it, perhaps with a thinner-soled shoe, pushed it firmly into the wooden frame.

The man who opened the door was in his thirties, his hair black and cut full, as tall as Beckett, his shoulders wide and prominent under the knitted shirt.

"You're Yarborough?" asked Beckett.

The man nodded. "My wife phoned you were on the way. Come in."

Though it was tastefully decorated in shades of blue and white, the apartment somehow gave the appearance of neglect.

"Terrible thing about Magillon," said Yarborough. "I'm still trying to believe it's really true. When you tapped at the door, for a moment I thought it was he. We were to meet here and take some things to Dukes. Magillon also lived in this building, you know."

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"I noticed the address. Your foursome seems to have run into bad luck. Exactly what happened to Dukes?"

Yarborough shrugged. "No one really knows. I guess it was his wife leaving him and the promotion he didn't get and maybe a few other things I never knew about—but I suppose it was the dream that finally did it. He told us he'd been having this dream every night in which he woke as though it was morning, showered, shaved, dressed, ate breakfast as usual, and went to the door to leave for the office. But when he opened the door, there was nothing there. No hallway, no outside world at all. Just a black wall he felt was waiting to swallow him up. He would awaken then and couldn't go to sleep afterward. He told us he'd gotten to the point where he was really afraid to open the door in the morning."

"And eventually he broke down?"

Yarborough nodded. "Magillon used to meet him downstairs and they would drive into the city together, so Magillon suggested he come to the apartment instead, because if Dukes knew he was out there, he would know there was nothing to fear and that would at least solve part of the problem. It didn't help. One morning last week Magillon heard a noise and opened the door. Dukes was kneeling there, crying, his hands over his face. Magillon called me. I came over but there was nothing we could do except call a doctor." He paused. "Ever see a man break down completely, Lieutenant?"

"It can shake you up. How is Dukes now?"

"Sits staring at the wall of his room. Some days he knows me, some days he doesn't." Yarborough smashed a fist into a palm. "Damn, I wish he had listened to Wister and gone to a psychiatrist."

"Did you see Magillon last night?"

"I was at the club for a few hours. His magic act was a big success. I thought it would be. He tried it out on me in his apartment. Used a girl friend as his assistant then, but one of the women at the club helped him last night. I left shortly after the show because my wife was at home alone."

"When you pulled out on the highway, did you notice a car parked nearby?"

Yarborough's voice went grim. "I did. For the second time. Some distance down from the lane."

"Do you remember who left about the time you did? They may have seen a lot more."

"Wister was a few minutes ahead of me."

Beckett glanced at his list. "Think I'll find him at home?"

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Yarborough smiled. "No. He spends every Sunday morning on the putting green at the club, which is why I can never beat him."

Beckett headed for the door, moving woodenly. The ache in his legs had escalated in intensity and his lips felt dry. In the car he sat for a few minutes, building enough energy to drive to the club. I'll see Wister, he thought, and then I'll pack it in for a few hours.

Again Beckett left his car near the clubhouse door and walked slowly along the path past the pro shop and around the building to a large putting green. A man hunched over a ball glared him into immobility, measured the distance carefully with his eyes, then stroked the ball firmly. The ball curved away from the hole, then broke sharply down an almost invisible incline, and dropped into the cup.

The man's pink scalp was surrounded by a fringe of white hair, his face was round and full, and he was a little thick through the waist. He smiled at Beckett. "If I could do that consistently, my life would be complete. Since you're not dressed for golf, I assume you're either a guest or the lieutenant I heard about."

Beckett lowered himself to a convenient bench. The ache had spread upward to his chest, making breathing difficult.

"I understand you left before Magillon."

Wister placed his hands on his hips and grinned. "So you *are* the lieutenant. Well, the entertainment was over and I could see no point in staying here and drinking. I could do that more comfortably in my home."

"Did you notice a car on the highway at the foot of the lane?"

"No, but then I wasn't really looking for one."

"What can you tell me about Magillon? Was he the type to resist if someone tried to hold him up?"

Wister shook his head. "He probably would have made a joke about it and handed over his wallet, but then Magillon made a joke of everything, even Dukes's breakdown, which I considered the height of bad taste."

"I understand Dukes refused help."

Wister shrugged. "You can't force a man to accept treatment. A simple tranquillizer would have made a big difference even if he wouldn't go to a psychiatrist, but Dukes was the type who didn't believe in pills. He felt he could cope with the problem without help. Like most people who prescribe for themselves, he was wrong."

Beckett stood, the putting green swaying a little. "There are prob-

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ably a great many questions I should ask," he said slowly, the words coming with difficulty, "but right now I can't think of them."

He started up the path. Wister caught up to him.

"You don't look well. Anything I can do?"

"I'll be all right after a few hours of sleep."

"I just gave you my opinion of people who prescribe for themselves, but if you insist on being stubborn, let's cut through the dining room. It will save you a few steps."

Except for a few people finishing breakfast, the dining room was deserted. As they neared the doorway to the corridor Beckett noticed a box, perhaps six feet high, three feet wide and three feet deep, standing against the wall. Black velvet draped the front.

Feeling his legs about to fail, he leaned against the door and to cover his weakness said, "I've never seen one of these in a dining room before."

"Part of Magillon's magic act. The disappearing-woman bit, although the woman didn't really disappear. I'll show you." Wister pulled the black velvet aside. "He had a woman step into the box and he lowered the curtain, shouted a few nonsensical incantations, and then pulled the curtain open. Your first impression was the woman was gone, but then you noticed that she had simply stepped to the rear of the box and pulled down a black shade which didn't quite reach the floor so that her feet and ankles were still visible.

"Of course, Magillon kept right on, pretending the trick was a success, completely ignoring the fact that the audience knew exactly where she was. It might not sound very funny in the telling but the way Magillon carried it off, people loved it."

Beckett nodded. "I think I get the picture."

His body was now one massive ache. The skin of his face felt as though he had stood too long, too close to an open fire, and his lips and throat were parched. A sudden chill shook him. He took a step and felt himself stagger as his joints screamed in protest.

Wister was in front of him, his voice crisp. "As I thought, you need more than a few hours of sleep."

"That," said Beckett weakly, "was probably your easiest diagnosis this week." And then his strength left him and he sagged and clutched the black velvet curtain for support and somehow its blackness washed over him.

The first day he was in the hospital he was only partially aware of little more than Spocker and Wister; of the doctors and nurses

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whispering words like influenza, streptococcus infection, and milligrams and CC's. The drugs they gave him made him sleep most of the time, and as he slept, he dreamed, and in the dreams there were Magillon and Yarborough and Wister and a door that opened to a deep blackness and swallowed him so that he saw nothing and seemed to tumble in an endless fall to the hollow laughter of a million people. And the bartender was there, his lips forming words that Beckett couldn't hear.

During the second night he woke to the quietness of the sleeping hospital, bathed in perspiration and somehow cool and refreshed, the fierce ache in his joints gone.

The room was dark except for a shaft of moonlight that reflected from the polished floor and gave the light-colored walls a soft eerie substance. At the foot of Beckett's bed the almost closed door, of a deep dark walnut veneer, absorbed the light to become a black rectangle, harsh and jarring in the silvery half light.

Beckett stared at it, bits and pieces of his dreams coming back, until dawn lightened the shadows and he closed his eyes and slept.

Spocker was his first visitor. "You know that car those people said they saw waiting on the highway? Turned out to be a private investigator hired by a wife to keep an eye on one of the members."

Beckett smiled. "Leclare?"

"How did you know?"

"I saw the look on his wife's face when he told me the car followed him one night."

Spocker spread his hands. "So much for the holdup theory."

"Never sounded right in the first place," said Beckett.

They discharged him two days later, and as Spocker drove down the hospital driveway Beckett said, "Take me to that apartment complex where Magillon and Dukes lived."

"You're supposed to go home and take it easy."

"I'll take it easy later. Right now I have something on my mind."

At Dukes's apartment Beckett found the pin he had pushed into the door frame, pulled it loose, and slowly scanned the floor. On the other side of the hall and some feet away, nestled in the seam where the rug joined the wall, he found another glass-headed pin. He handed them to Spocker. "Put them in an envelope and take me to the country club."

Spocker groaned. "I should have known better."

At the club Beckett found Kane, the manager, in his office. "The big box Magillon used in his magic act. Is it still here?"

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Kane nodded. "Should be. We put it outside with the rest of the rubbish but I don't believe it has been collected yet."

The box was there, lined up with the trash cans. It was nothing more than a large carton, its edges reinforced with strips of wood, that had once held a refrigerator or something equally large. For his magic act Magillon had simply painted it black, attached a black window shade inside, and fastened the black velvet curtain at the top with several push pins driven into the wood frame.

Beckett removed them all, gave them to Spocker, folded the velvet, and asked Kane, "Are Dr. Wister and Yarborough here?"

Kane glanced at his watch. "They usually tee off about this time but they won't be happy to lose their rotation."

"It won't matter," said Beckett. "I don't think either of them will want to play today."

Beckett waited at Kane's desk. The office was small, the one window shaded by the portico so that when Beckett turned off the overhead fluorescent, the daylight faded before it reached the far corners. Wister came in first, his eyes curious. Yarborough appeared annoyed.

"Slight problem with the light," said Beckett, "but close the door anyway."

Wister pushed it closed.

"Couldn't this wait?" asked Yarborough. "Lord knows when we'll get a chance to tee off now."

"Since Magillon was part of your foursome, I thought you'd like to know who killed him," said Beckett.

Wister leaned forward a little in anticipation. "Who?"

Beckett looked from one to the other. "One or both of you."

Yarborough stiffened. "You're crazy!"

Beckett shrugged. "A confession would make it easier for everyone."

Wister sighed. "Lieutenant, for a minute I thought you were serious. Do you mind if we go?"

"I guess not," said Beckett.

Wister opened the door and stepped back hastily. Yarborough gasped.

Instead of the corridor outside, the open doorway exposed nothing more than a black rectangle in the shadowed wall of the office that seemed to absorb all light and stretch chillingly into infinity, the world outside gone.

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Beckett waited.

Wister poked out a curious finger, then turned to Beckett, surprise in his voice. "It's a piece of velvet!"

Beckett nodded. "If you had killed Magillon or been part of it, you'd have known that without touching it. Like Yarborough."

Yarborough was standing rigid and white-faced.

"Do you want to tell us now?" asked Beckett.

Yarborough pushed his hands deep into his pockets. "You can't prove anything."

"Sure I can. I'll start by asking the kid Harry how much you paid him to stall the Leclare car so that no one could follow Magillon down the lane. I could have done that without staging this little scene, but I wanted to see the expression on your face when that door opened."

Wister touched the velvet. "Like the dream," he said in a low voice. "Dukes's dream. He would open the door and there was nothing there."

He spun, his voice suddenly angry. "Magillon?"

"Magillon," said Yarborough quietly. "Anything for a laugh with no thought for the consequences. I felt from the beginning something was wrong. Dukes might have been having a problem but he could have handled it. There had to be something more, something Dukes couldn't anticipate."

"How did you find out?" asked Wister.

"When I called you that morning, I noticed a piece of black cloth protruding from beneath the sofa. I didn't think anything of it at the time. Dukes hadn't been much for housework since his wife left. I had forgotten about it until Magillon gave me the little preview of his magic act. Seeing that black velvet curtain reminded me. I went down to Dukes's apartment. There was nothing under the sofa." Yarborough's face was grim, his voice low. "Only Magillon and I had keys to the apartment and *I* sure as hell hadn't removed it.

"I stood there and thought about it and I realized Magillon would have considered it very funny if Dukes opened that door one morning and really saw that black wall he'd been dreaming about. I guess he thought he'd pull the velvet aside and have a big laugh, but when Dukes opened the door he must have been so confused he couldn't tell if he was dreaming or awake. His mind couldn't handle it."

Wister's voice was flat, the word he chose for Magillon obscene.

"What he'd done was bad enough," said Yarborough, "but he

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ducked the responsibility. He simply took the velvet down before I got there, hid it under the sofa, and waited until you and I rushed Dukes to the hospital before carrying it back to his apartment to use in his damned magic act."

"He didn't *simply* take it down," said Beckett. "He tore it down. The pins he used to hold it in place popped loose. I found them in the hallway. Either he couldn't find them or he never bothered to look because he didn't consider them important. I have an idea he panicked a little when he saw what he'd done."

"Maybe he did," said Yarborough, "but he got over it. When I went back to his apartment and accused him, he said he didn't know what I was talking about, but he laughed when he said it."

Wister scrubbed at his forehead. "I find it hard to believe."

Beckett indicated the door. "It's rather obvious. If no direct light hits that velvet, and it doesn't in Dukes's apartment, you can't tell what it is until you get close and examine it after the initial shock. Dukes was in no condition to survive that initial shock."

Wister gestured angrily. "I didn't mean that. I meant that I can't believe one man could be so stupid and insensitive."

"Magillon could," said Yarborough. "He demonstrated that for a year and we did nothing but laugh. The time for laughing was over. I couldn't get the picture of Dukes kneeling on the floor crying out of my mind."

"So you decided to kill Magillon for what he'd done to Dukes," said Beckett. "You paid the kid to delay everyone after he left so there would be no witnesses. You flagged Magillon down and when he opened the window, you shot him, hoping we'd think it was a holdup that had gone wrong. But you didn't follow it through by taking his wallet."

"I wasn't thinking clearly."

"That's obvious," said Beckett drily. "Among the many things that never occurred to you was that while Dukes could still be cured in spite of what Magillon had done, once you put that bullet in him, no one could do anything for Magillon."

He raised his voice. "You can take it down now, Spocker!"

The velvet fell. Spocker began to fold it slowly and methodically. Beyond him stood Kane and several curious members, and the world outside was bright and warm and familiar.

But not to Yarborough, Beckett realized. The way he stood, staring, the velvet was still in place, with nothing for him beyond it.

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

"This wasn't murder, it was delayed suicide."

"Nothing is simple where people are concerned."

"People were sane if you accepted that they were crazy to start with."

One of William Bankier's most thoughtful stories . . .

PAID IN ADVANCE

by WILLIAM BANKIER

It took Sam Darien completely by surprise when Soper got to the point, and the point was an arrangement for Soper's own execution. Darien was to kill Soper under certain conditions. For five hundred dollars. It was a lot of money in 1926—Darien seldom turned down a hit when good money was involved. But it shook him to realize that this conventional individual in the chalk-stripe suit knew what Darien did for a living.

They were sitting on a bench in Dominion Square. There was just enough sun to make it an April day. Soper was eating his lunch from a paper bag while Darien tried not to look. "This conversation is just about over," Darien said. "You're not making sense." But he could not get up and walk away because Soper had mentioned the influential name of Lucien St. Denis.

"You've nothing to fear from me," Soper said with his mouth full. "I am Monsieur St. Denis' chartered accountant. I've done him favors that meant big money to him and kept him out of court. Now he's done me one by giving me your name."

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It sounded legitimate but Darien was still uneasy. There was something abnormal about this character. Assignments did not come from Sunday-school teachers. But if Soper had cooked the books and kept secrets for St. Denis, there had to be more in him than met the eye. "Go on," Darien said. "What's supposed to happen?"

"Ever heard of a place called Baytown?"

"Between here and Toronto?"

"That's right. I come from there and in a few days I'm going back. To see my mother."

Darien concentrated on a chestnut horse pulling a calêche along Dorchester Street. It looked real, it looked normal, not part of a dream. "And then what?" he said, prompting the patient, humoring him. Jared Soper kept eating as he explained what was going to happen.

Growing up in Baytown, he had been his mother's pride and joy. The Soper family had money and lived in a big house on a good street. Martha Soper had been a Falkender, the daughter of Magistrate Falkender who practically ran the county when the population of Baytown was less than 4000. Now it was over ten and Martha Falkender Soper, an elderly widow, was living out her affluent old age in the great frame house.

Soper stopped eating as he got into his story, put aside the paper bag still fat with grapes and bread crusts, abandoned his vague manner, and began to sound aggressive.

"I was a big-timer at Baytown High School. I excelled at Maths. The professors at a private school called me in once to explain equations in differential calculus. I knew the subject better than they did. Martha used to dine out on that story. I was her boy." Soper smiled as he clutched the striped lapels into a knot under his chin and made his face into a mask of tragedy. "I was not always as you see me now," he said.

Despite himself, Sam Darien began to respond to this strange person beside him on the bench. He shifted his position to face Soper and crossed his legs. A cloud moved and permitted the sun to pour down extra warmth. "So what happened?" Darien asked.

"What else? A woman. I met Mariette Charpentier at an accountants' convention I attended in Montreal. This was ten years ago, a long time after my golden age in high school. I was in a rut in Baytown. Mariette lifted me out of it, and out of Baytown too. I had to marry her, but I never regretted that. The baby didn't live and she never got pregnant again, so we ended up alone. Funny the way

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things work out. Anyway, mother never forgave me for marrying a French-Canadian."

Darien had never married. He was always fascinated by men who jumped into that rough sea and managed to swim. It could never be for him, so he admired the trick all the more. "Sounds like you've got a good woman," he said.

"The best," Soper agreed. "That's where the money comes in." He needed $50,000. An opportunity had arisen for him to buy into a business. It would mean the end of sweating for somebody else. It would mean security and position for Mariette. She deserved that much. "Mother has the money. She could hand it over and never miss it. But I'm not sure she will. Anyway, that's why I'm going back to Baytown."

"Why are you telling me this?" Darien asked. "Where do I come in?"

"You come in after I see Martha. She may surprise us by giving me the money. If she does, fine. You do nothing and keep your fee." Soper reached into an inside pocket and took out an envelope. He handed it to Darien. "There's five hundred dollars in there. My life's savings. If I get the fifty thousand, I won't need it any more. If I don't, then you'll be required to earn your money."

"By killing you?" Darien felt uncomfortable holding the envelope. He put it out of sight.

"That's right," Soper said. "It'll be up to you to find me and shoot me—preferably without my knowledge. Courage is not my specialty."

"But she's your mother. I mean, if she won't give you the money—"

"If she doesn't oblige me," Soper explained patiently, "something is going to happen to her on the spot. I'm not sure exactly what. But I know my responses these days where she is concerned. She refuses me, we argue, and then—I don't know, but she's going to get hurt."

Darien did an unusual thing for him. He touched Soper's shoulder to make the man look up, to stop him staring at the pavement in that vacant, disturbing way. "I still don't understand," he said gently. "Suppose you *do* lose your temper and hurt your mother. Won't you want to disappear? With money in your pocket, you can make a run for it."

"A run," Soper agreed. "But I'd be caught. And I'd go to jail. There's the crux of the situation. I cannot stand confinement, Mr. Darien. To be shut up in a cell would be worse for me than death.

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Far worse. That's why I'm paying you in advance." He spoke slowly and distinctly. "If my mother refuses me, I'll—whatever I do, the police will get me. Before that happens, you must terminate my life, suddenly, without my being aware. You have the money. Is it a deal?"

Sam Darien heard a babble of conflicting advice inside his head. This was crazy. It was not his line of work at all. The last thing he needed was to involve himself with an unknown quantity like Jared Soper. If he had any sense he would hand back the envelope, walk away, and prepare himself to answer Lucien St. Denis if there should be any repercussions.

Darien nodded. "It's a deal," he said.

Before he left Montreal for Baytown, Soper asked the news agent at Peel and Ste. Catherine to obtain for him the Baytown daily newspaper. He advised Darien of the arrangement so that Darien could pick up the *Banner* each day and keep abreast of events in the Ontario community.

Darien found the paper boring. There was not much international news in it, none of the interesting material about Mussolini and events in Europe that he liked to digest with his smoked meat and coffee at the counter in Ben's. Instead, there was a long story about a concert by the local Scottish pipe band beside an account of damage caused by high winds to one of the fairground pavilions. And the advertising had no style; it listed food products like a catalogue, and the drawings of ladies' clothing put him in mind of dresses he used to see ten years before on Sherbrooke Street.

Then Soper's story hit the front page. On this day Darien was soaking in his bathtub. He had sent the boy from down the hall to pick up the *Banner* and the *Gazette*. Darien browsed through the Montreal paper before he picked up the much thinner small-town daily. The headline was of an unaccustomed size—it made the front page look embarrassed.

MARTHA SOPER MURDERED
Axe Killing at Bridge Street Mansion

Darien sat up, soapy water streaming from his shoulders. He read the story intently. The old lady's body had been found late at night on the lawn beside the family residence after neighbors heard a scream. She had been struck five times on the head with a hatchet which was found later by police in a concrete birdbath in the back garden.

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Mrs. Soper's maid and companion told police that Mr. Jared Soper had visited his mother that evening. The maid heard voices raised in argument not long before the scream aroused the neighborhood. The police wanted Soper for questioning.

For three days Sam Darien took no action while Soper's five-hundred-dollar fee rested in his safe-deposit box. He had no idea where to look for the accountant, was not even sure he should try. The situation made no sense. All right, press your rich old lady for money she can afford. If she refuses, threaten her. Tie her up and rob the house. If she is as infuriatingly possessive and soul-destroying as a lot of mothers, then twist her arm and make her cry. But five blows on the head with a hatchet? After you've let the maid see you and hear you arguing? This wasn't murder, it was delayed suicide.

Suicide. Darien was wise enough to know that people terminated their own lives in various ornate and arcane ways. Your tenth-floor jumper was only the tip of the iceberg. There were armies of pill takers and drunken drivers. Soper's way was to pay a hired killer in advance, giving instructions that he was to be hit if the police were after him. Then he went out and committed the most inescapable crime of the century.

Darien went on pondering. If suicide was the motive, he wondered why Soper had not simply paid for his own murder without the embellishment of the gaudy affair in Baytown. Back came the answer that nothing is simple where people are concerned. Perhaps Soper really believed he could argue his mother into staking him to $50,000. He had his Mariette at home and he wanted to give her lots of things. But another part of him wanted to escape a troubled life. People were sane if you accepted that they were crazy to start with.

Two days later Darien was considering asking Lucien St. Denis for Soper's address so he could mail the $500 to Mrs. Soper. Then he read in the *Banner* that the murderer had been arrested. The circumstances were incredible. Soper had actually paid a local taxi driver to chauffeur him from Baytown to Toronto—a distance of 100 miles! In Toronto he had checked into a hotel near the Union Station at 2:30 in the morning, emphasizing his presence by going out and buying the desk clerk a basket of grapes at a pre-dawn market stall. The only thing he did not do was take out a full-page ad in the *Mail & Empire* announcing his arrival.

Soper was now back in Baytown jail, exactly where he did not

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want to be. His message to Darien had been clear: no confinement—death was preferable. Darien could sympathize with this. Faced with arrest and knowing what he knew of the purgatory called prison, Darien would eat his own gun any day.

So he owed Jared Soper a bullet. The question was how to deliver it. Baytown security would not be very efficient. It might be possible to get close enough to do the job. But the concept filled Darien with apprehension. He had never worked this way. His method—the premise of the hired assassin—was to strike from nowhere and vanish. But here was a man under close confinement. Police would be everywhere; so would reporters and curious citizens, all with eyes focused on the star of the show. How could Darien move into and out of a setup like that?

He went to Baytown to find a way. He boarded a train one afternoon in late May when Soper had been in jail for almost a month. Darien was feeling guilty, knowing how panic must be affecting the caged man. He had the $500 in his pocket in the original envelope, half hoping there would be some way to give it back. Who was crazy now? Did he expect to fasten it to an arrow and shoot it between the bars of Soper's cell window?

Darien took a room at the Coronet Hotel a few blocks from the Court House where Soper was being held. The man behind the desk spoke with a brisk Scottish accent. He might have arrived on the most recent boat from Glasgow but from what he said, he had spent 20 years in Baytown. Darien bought a cigar from a box displayed inside the glass-topped desk and stood around, smoking and asking questions. He learned that local opinion was of two schools. Some felt Soper was not responsible owing to mental instability; the majority believed he was guilty and destined to hang.

This appraisal showed Darien a way out of his moral dilemma. If Soper was due to be executed, then his days in confinement were limited. Darien need not extend himself to fulfill the bizarre contract. He could let events take their course. Once the hanging took place, his only obligation would be to give back the unearned fee. The widow should welcome $500 out of a blue sky.

"When will the trial take place?" Darien asked.

"June," the desk clerk said. "Mrs. Soper was an important lady. They aren't wasting any time."

Darien stood with his elbow on the desk, staring through the front window at the market square and the police station on the far side. "My room," he said. "Can I have it on a weekly rate?" He could

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afford to spend some time in Baytown. There was money in the bank and he had no other business at the moment. The clerk told him the weekly rate. "Put me down for it," Darien said. "I may be here for some time."

During the weeks that followed, the visitor from Montreal roamed the streets of the placid town. Summer came early this year. The maples joined branches above the narrow roads and formed a green cathedral nave above Darien's head. The kids were in school much of the day but in the late afternoon he saw them in threes and fours whirring along sidewalks on roller skates. On a screen porch a gray-haired lady poured lemonade from a pitcher. A youth in a Baytown High School sweater with the sleeves rolled up pushed a mower over a lawn and the smell of fresh-cut grass made Darien stop and pretend to wind his watch.

Most days he ended up on a bench on Station Road looking up at the rising terraced lawn beyond which stood the granite Court House. A high stone wall surrounded the other three sides of the building and Darien knew that somewhere within those walls was the maximum security cell containing his client.

Darien always carried his copy of the *Banner* and on these days, squinting in the perpetual sunshine, he would turn the pages, reading the rehash of stories filling time and space until the trial.

As for the trial itself, Darien stayed away. He left town, in fact, and went back to Montreal to see about his mail and talk to anybody who might have been trying to reach him. But he kept his room at the Coronet Hotel, storing some clothes in it. The trial took place, claiming substantial coverage in the Montreal papers. Darien followed the proceedings to their foregone conclusion—a verdict against Jared Soper of guilty of first-degree murder. He would be hanged by the neck until he was dead in the stone-walled yard behind the Court House in one month's time.

Darien could have mailed a check to the Coronet Hotel and gone about his business. Instead, he bought another ticket from Canadian National Railways and went back to Baytown. Why? What was the point? An attack on the condemned man in his cell by Darien disguised as, let's say, a priest would be absurd. Even if it worked, it would only advance by a few days the death that Soper wanted so much that he had paid for it in advance.

Still, Darien returned to Baytown not long before the other hired killer whose wages would be paid by the Province of Ontario. Soper's wife was in town these days as well. The front page of the *Banner*

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carried a grainy photograph of Mariette Charpentier Soper standing by the Court House door, her jet hair parted in the middle and drawn back severely; the worry lines and absence of makeup did not detract from her classic beauty. She looked to Darien like a woman who might have worked with a ballet company.

As the day of the hanging approached, newspaper coverage intensified. Darien sat on his bench and read each pathetic story as it appeared. "Soper's 35th Birthday," ran one headline with the subhead: "Last Earthly Sunday and Last Birthday for Condemned Man Unless Department Intervenes." There was to be the presentation of a cake minus candles prepared by jail officials and guards. The prisoner had gained several pounds in weight since his confinement. He solved crossword puzzles to pass the time. The gallows construction would begin on Monday, failing a reprieve from the Department of Justice in Ottawa.

The Salvation Army band was to gather in the prison yard on Sunday morning and play a program of hymns for the prisoner. A local lumber merchant was interviewed and described the timber he was supplying for the gallows, all dimensions carefully listed by the *Banner* reporter. Other prisoners playing softball in the yard granted Soper his wish to act as umpire; he called the balls and strikes through his barred window.

On Tuesday, word came that commutation of the death penalty had been refused. The execution was scheduled for Wednesday midnight. Darien had brief conversations with many Baytowners during the day and a half and he overheard other people talking. As far as he could gather, not one single individual wanted Soper to hang. The condition of the population, reflected in print, resembled hypnosis, or a crowd watching a tragedy from a great distance.

The last day and night passed and then Soper was dead. "Just a minute," he was reported as saying when the warden came to tell him his time was up . . .

The meeting between Darien and Mariette Soper took place on the train on the way back to Montreal on Thursday evening. Darien was returning to his chair in the parlor car after having dinner when he saw the familiar-looking woman sitting in a half-empty coach. He excused himself, said he had known Jared, and then, when she made him welcome with a smile, sat down facing her with the green countryside flashing past the window.

"How is it you knew Jared?" Her English was slightly accented.

"Business arrangements."

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"You're a commercial traveler?"

"Not exactly. I'm a contractor."

She was an intelligent woman. "I saw you on the platform in Baytown. Did you go there because of what they did to him?"

"Yes."

She looked into his eyes and nodded the way a person does who has uncovered the question but not the answer. "That is unusual."

The train rolled on. Darien bought them soft drinks from a vendor passing through the coach. She sipped hers attentively. "The only good thing," she said, "is that Jared is now free. He did a terrible thing. I think he was out of his mind. But it's over."

"What I hate is the way they did it." Darien could not resist justifying his trade even though this woman had no idea what he did for a living. "Everybody dies," he said. "Ten years sooner or ten years later, it comes anyway. What bothered me was the ritual, the band playing hymns, the reporters writing it all down, the machinery to do it when all it takes is a bullet. I'm sorry, am I . . .?"

"It's all right. What's the difference?"

"And the phony prayers for forgiveness. Who really believes that? Maybe you do, but I don't."

"I used to but I don't any more."

"Then we think the same."

The train stopped at Dorval—Montreal only half an hour away. She said to him, "We'll be home soon."

"Not long now."

"Maybe you'd like to come and have a cup of coffee with me. Jared's friend. I'd feel better not being alone tonight."

"I know how you feel." She took that as yes. When she got up to go to the washroom, Darien sat for a minute looking out at the darkening sky. The window was a mirror now and he could see the grim set of his face. Nobody knew who he was. It would be crazy to let anybody know. Suicide.

He reached into his pocket and took out the envelope that Soper had given him months ago on the bench in Dominion Square. The five $100 bills were still inside. She had taken her purse with her but her coat lay across the seat. Darien reached across and stuffed the envelope securely into a pocket. Then he got up and left the coach, fleeing unsteadily down the corridor of the speeding train.

Leaving the station in Montreal, he saw her again in the distance and thought she might have seen him, but he put his head down and kept walking.

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a *NEW* Milo Turner story by

FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.

Milo Turner, one of our favorite con men, is often forced to play detective either to extricate himself from impending disaster or to bring off a successful caper. His newest scam is a superscam, chiefly because it has one surprising—no, one unique—feature. The scam is absolutely legal!

THE WESTERN FILM SCAM

by FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.

I put the book back on the steel shelf, three feet from the body, and listened. The storage room was empty except for the dead man and me; no sound but my own thundering heartbeat. I heard footsteps along some unseen corridor, maybe heading this way, I couldn't be sure. I knew I hadn't killed the man, and the reference book had confirmed my theory as to who had, but it still wouldn't do to be found in that film-storage vault with a fresh corpse.

So I ran. Swiftly and silently as I could, like a poor imitation of an Indian. Back through the storage room and along the corridor to the loading-dock exit. Luck stayed with me. I met no one. I took out a handkerchief to avoid leaving prints, twisted back the lock, flung the door open, and leaped down to the Thirteenth Street sidewalk. Then I made myself slow down to a brisk walk and put as much distance between myself and the offices of KBMO-TV as my legs would allow.

West half a mile, then south to Olive where I caught a Bi-State bus that took me into the thick of the St. Louis business district where I could lose myself. Then I got off and walked aimlessly, wherever the crowds were. By now both the local cops and the Feds must be hunting me. I needed quiet time to sort out the mess.

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So I turned in at Stadium Cinema II, a couple of blocks north of Busch Stadium, and bought two hours of peace. The matinee attraction was one of those trendy older-woman younger-man romances, just the kind of film I could ignore completely as I leaned back in the well-upholstered theater chair and sent my thoughts returning to where it had all begun . . .

On that soft and quiet Los Angeles evening ten days after John West's funeral, despite smog and inflation and the energy crunch, I was at peace. The profits from my last adventure guaranteed three more months of ease, and I had nothing in mind but relaxation when my annunciator bloop-bleeped and a familiar if not totally welcome voice emerged from the machine's innards. "It's Louie. Just heard you were in town. Okay if I come up?" Without great enthusiasm I consented and crossed the living room of my hideaway apartment to lower the volume on the TV, which happened to be tuned to an old John West movie.

Of course half of the stations in the world were running West pictures that evening, and had been since a brain tumor had finally toppled the old oak two weeks before. The dozens of Westerns he'd starred in during his salad years, the war pictures, the macho action flicks—every station that could scrounge a West package from a distributor was blitzing the airwaves with the big rangy body, the king-of-the-hill walk, the drawl that had made John West a symbol of America for the world. So it wasn't really unusual that the booms and bangs of West's Korean War epic *The Beaches of Inchon* were providing background noise as Louie sat on my couch, downing a double jolt of my bourbon and trying to sell me his latest scheme.

Lou the Q—a short wiry-bodied lummox with arms as long as a monkey's and a face to match—had knocked around the fringes of scamdom for a dozen years under five dozen names. Rumor was that he'd been born Louis Quackenbush, which would explain his nickname. In Dallas he'd worked as Uthas Haggerson, in Minneapolis as J. Rudolph Klug; but no matter where he operated or what name he used, his scams had the same nasty habit of falling apart on him. He'd been slammered only once, however, and that time luck was his cellmate.

During the year he'd served at the Federal pen in Lexington, Kentucky under the name of Harold O'Flynn, the cops never caught on that he was wanted in three other states under three other aliases. Since his release six months ago he'd been out of circulation,

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which wasn't surprising since most of us in the life considered him a jinx and wouldn't work with him. I had never pulled a job with him but I'd found him to be one of those dullards who inspire brightness in others, and a few of my past nifties had been conjured up during casual chats with him. Louie knew I owed him for those inspirations. That was why he was sprawled on my couch now, pitching an inspiration of his own.

"The guy in the cell next to me, he was a film pirate. One of those people who make duplicate prints or cassettes of movies and sell 'em to collectors. He was serving a year for criminal copyright infringement and I was bored in the slam so he said he'd teach me copyright law. Everybody else in the place was reading constitutional law and prisoners' rights stuff, I read copyright. Wild, huh?"

"Untamed," I murmured, sipping Early Times and wondering where this meandering monologue would end.

"And I watched a lotta shoot-'em-ups on the tube." Louie pointed vaguely across the room toward the flickers of colored light from my set. "He was my favorite—John West as The Rio Kid. God, I musta seen those Rio Kid flicks twenty times apiece when I was a boy. Did you know his real name was Adrian Jonathan Westmoreland and he was born in Mount Clemens, Michigan?" He scooped up last week's *Time* from the coffee table, the one with West's craggy face on the cover, and thumbed through the magazine for the lead story.

"Listen, Milo," he demanded, and began to read aloud from the obituary survey of the great Hollywood he-man's career. " 'For most of the 1930's he was confined on the open ranges of the low-budget Western film, starring in some two dozen quickly lensed oaters as The Rio Kid, a border adventurer who was the hero of countless pulp magazine yarns by a long-forgotten hack named J. F. Carewe. In later years an embittered and impoverished Carewe made a sort of retirement hobby out of telling interviewers how the movies had softened and sanitized his authentic roughneck creation. Savants of horse opera agree that the films resembled Carewe's stories only in that the name Rio Kid was used for the hero, but they rank these pictures, which gave West his first crack at stardom, as among the finest series Westerns ever made. The studio went bankrupt in 1949 and the Rio Kid movies eventually fell into the public domain when no one bothered to renew the copyrights.' "

Louie rolled the magazine into a cylinder and aimed it at the TV. "Get it, Milo? All the Rio Kid movies are in public domain. You know what that means?"

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"It means anyone can use the films as they please without paying any permissions or royalties," I hazarded.

Louie grinned like a monkey who's found an especially tasty banana. "Not quite. There's a catch I learned from that film pirate. A couple of cases say that if a public-domain work is based on another work that's still in copyright, you infringe the other work if you use the public-domain work. You see the plan now?"

"Vaguely," I told him. "Did J. F. Carewe renew the copyrights on his pulp stories?"

"You betcha. Like clockwork. And when he died in 1956, a lonely old widower with everything he wrote long out of print and forgotten, he left a very simple will. All his property including literary rights went to his only child, a daughter named Carolyn Carewe who's now a spinster in her seventies, living in a retirement home in northern California."

I raised my hand to halt the flow of data. "Okay, time out. Your idea is for us to contact this old lady, buy the rights to the Rio Kid stories as cheap as we can, then threaten to sue every station that runs those old movies unless they pay our price?"

"On the button, man," Louie nodded, and took a long swallow of bourbon. "You wanna be my partner or you wanna not?"

The more I tossed it around my brain pan the better I liked it, not least because technically it was legal. No wonder Louie had come to me: he needed a partner, and most confidence people wouldn't touch one of his scams with a mile-long pole. But this gem, if polished properly, had magnificent possibilities.

I answered his question with a definite maybe and watched him lurch hazily to my apartment door.

The next day I spent at the UCLA Law Library, checking out Louie's copyright theory in assorted treatises and journals, then reading the relevant judicial opinions as printed in the National Reporter System. By 6:00 P.M. I decided that the Kentucky film pirate had known his onions. The top legal scholars seemed to think the whole notion was silly—after all, if there are hidden patches of copyright in public-domain works, the basic concept and rationale of the public domain is destroyed—but just as one can make bread using an off-brand of yeast, I proposed to make bread using this quirk in the law. I called Louie late that evening and closed a deal with him.

Step Two took a few days and required the services of a lawyer.

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I needed to form a corporation to hold legal title to the rights we were going to buy from Carolyn Carewe. In due course Western Properties, Inc. was registered with the California Secretary of State. Its president's and vice-president's names were listed as John J. Terwilliger and August Lunt, since my rightful name and Louie's were too well known in certain official circles.

Step Three took no more than a phone call to Jock Schultz, the disembodied Dublin brogue that runs our profession's human supermarket. "That's the job description, Jocko. A woman who can persuade an old spinster to sign over some worthless literary rights her father left her. A woman who can talk convincingly about old Western novels and movies if she has to. Know anyone who can do it?"

"Call ye back in an hour," he promised. And true to his word, he had my lady for me in exactly 52 minutes. ". . . And ye get a bonus too, me bucko, in that she is a quintessential Ten. Her name is Becca Benbow. Tall, twenty-eight, form divine. She partnered with Fats Adamo last year in the Disco Cola thing."

"Speak no more," I told the Jock. "That's all the recommendation she needs. Can you set up a meet for me?"

He could and did, and that Friday evening I met her plane at L.A. International. She was honey-skinned and slender, with rich brown hair falling loosely below her shoulders. I felt like bending my knee and kissing her hand, for this lady was royalty in more than just looks.

Inside word had it that without her, Disco Cola would have been the world's fattest turkey instead of the superscam of the age. We found a dark corner in a quiet airport lounge, and as I unveiled the proposal to her she nodded and said "Uh-huh," her eyes glowing with the pure joy of the caper. "Equal split?" she asked at the end of my pitch.

I took a moment to ask myself if I could bulldoze Louie into accepting another partner, then nodded. "I wouldn't dream of offering you less," I replied, proud of my non-sexist approach to sharing the spoils. "Take a room at an airport hotel and catch PSA's first flight to San Francisco in the morning. Get cards printed up identifying you as, let's call you Roberta Ross, and your title will be Chief of the Purchasing Department, Western Properties, Inc. Then you rent a car and drive north to the retirement home where Carolyn Carewe lives. After you've signed her up, give me a call here and let me know how much I have to put in the corporate bank account to cover

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your check. The Rio Kid stories have been out of print for thirty years, so the price shouldn't be steep."

"And meanwhile what will you be doing?" Becca poked the ice in her Scotch-and-soda with a plastic swizzle stick.

"Research," I said. "Pinpointing our first target."

For the next two days and evenings I sat in the Reading Room of the Los Angeles Public Library, hunched over the back files of numerous out-of-town newspapers, skimming the TV sections with my eyes keen for any station that ran old Westerns and the Rio Kid pictures in particular. On the second evening I went over my accumulated list and chose St. Louis, Missouri. Home of the Gateway Arch, the baseball and football Cardinals, the Anheuser-Busch Brewery, and, more to the point, the home of KBMO-TV, Channel 39, which, according to the *Post-Dispatch* and *Globe-Democrat* listings, broadcast an old horse opera every weeknight from 10:00 to 11:00 P.M.

I had some qualms about returning to the city where four years ago one of my juiciest scams had blown apart, leaving me with a pile of cash and the solution to an old murder case. But I was so excited over this new ploy—which, if it worked, could be replayed in city after city all over the land—that I told the voice of caution to be quiet.

Late that night back in my apartment, I was relaxing with a glass of white wine when the phone rang. Becca, my ESP told me, and when I lifted the receiver and cautiously helloed, sure enough it was she. "Got her!" she crowed. "And dirt cheap too. The poor bird's so grateful anyone still cares about her father's silly old stories she practically donated them to us." After we settled the financial details I gave her the next set of instructions. "Relax tomorrow and fly back in the evening. I'll pick you up at LAX. We'll get the transfers recorded with the Copyright Office. Then we pack our bags."

"Going where?" For a second I thought she was almost too eager to know. "A place with some good shopping centers?"

"Maybe," I said coyly.

No sooner had we broken connections than I fingered the touch-tones myself, punching out Louie's local number. I caught him comparatively dry and reported his newfound partner's success. Then I gave him his travel orders.

"So it's meet me in St. Louie, Louie, heh?" he muttered. "Okay, I'll fly out tomorrow and start softening up the strike zone."

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"And without liquid assistance," I warned sternly. "Have a smooth flight."

Then I settled back and killed the next day rereading books on the history of the Western film until Becca called me to pick her up at the airport.

We drove out to Tarzana for a delightful Japanese dinner at a place called Mon's, and over tempura and teriyaki I brought her up to date. ". . . He's in St. Louis by now, getting things ready for our arrival after we finish our paperwork."

Becca's lovely dark eyes clouded with hints of worry. "I'm frankly not crazy about this Louie with all his names." She sipped sake from a delicate white bowl. "He's a drunk and a jinx and he could mess things up royally."

"Granted. But, my sweet, he created this scam and we can't very well freeze him out at this stage. On the other hand, after we test-market the idea in St. Louis, I may want to buy out his share in the company and work the rest of the country just with you." I dazzled her with my most suggestive smile. "In fact, I'm quivering with delight over the prospect."

It was Sunday evening when a dour Lou the Q met us near the luggage carousels at Lambert-St. Louis International Airport. He lit up with momentary pleasure when he met his new partner, but something was clearly amiss with him and I couldn't tell whether it was sour stomach, shot nerves, or a hitch in the plans. He drove us in a rented car to our downtown headquarters at Stouffer's Riverfront Inn, less than a mile from KBMO's studios and offering fine views of the muddy Mississippi. Once unpacked and settled in, the three of us convened in my suite for drinks and a briefing. Louie's highball, carefully prepared by myself, was 99 percent mixer and ice.

"I got us a lawyer," the Q reported. "His name's Napoleon Jimson and he's young, mean, and black. He took a copyright course in law school, so he knows the game. And he's been involved in a lawsuit to take away Channel 39's operating license and give it to some black coalition, so he knows our pigeons."

"Sounds like a winner," I murmured, and Becca nodded solemn concurrence. "Tell us about the people who run the station."

"The place is a zoo." Before I could stop him Louie poured himself a too-generous slug of Early Times over rocks and shook the glass in his hairy paw to cool the booze down. "The station's owned by

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Blair Communications Company. That's a subsidiary of Blairco, the big conglomerate. The son of the president of Blairco is the station manager. Bradford Lockwood Blair the Second. The assistant station manager is a prune named Jerome McKenna who used to run the shop himself before Blair bought the station and put in his kid as head cheese. The program director is a guy named David Wilkes. He's been with the station about a year. The word is that he and the head of advertising and promotion, a fantastic blonde named Susan Otis, are the ones who persuaded young Blair to run those old cowboy pictures. I've also heard gossip that Otis and McKenna were a combo until Wilkes took her away from him.'"

"With all those undercurrents of emotion it's a wonder the station manages to broadcast anything," Becca remarked, strolling to the window with her drink to look at the lights twinkling on the river.

"Our office is all rented and ready," Louie went on after a long pull at his glass. "It's on the tenth floor of the Paul Brown Building over on Olive. An easy walk from here and from there to KBMO."

"Louie would have been a great White House advance man if he hadn't chosen another line," I told Becca.

She turned from the window and smiled at Louie's simian façade. "Teach me not to go by appearances. Milo, if the game starts tomorrow I'm turning in right now." She yawned lustily, swallowed the last of her drink, and headed for the door. "Jet lag always knocks me out. Night, guys."

A few minutes after her departure Louie got up and started to take his own leave, until I halted him with a traffic-cop arm motion. "Whoa! You don't sleep till I find out why you look like the boy whose dog just died. What haven't you told me?"

He shuffled back and forth, cracking his knuckles explosively. "I woulda told you, Milo, only I didn't wanta panic the chick."

"Ms. Benbow is a full and equal partner in this scam, you chauvinistic porker," I reproved him. "Now cough up the bad news."

"It mighta just been my imagination," he said furtively. "You can never be sure about a thing like this. But the other day, over on Twelfth a few blocks from KBMO, I saw a guy on the street that I thought I recognized."

"Who was it?"

"That's what I don't know, but I think it was someone from when I was working the South and calling myself Hal O'Flynn. It mighta been one of the Feds who got me on that rap. Milo, I swear it scared the stuffing outa me. Every damn scam I'm on, something goes

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haywire. It's like I'm planting trees and bushes in my yard and all the bagworms in the block pick my shrubs for their nests."

I shook him sternly by the shoulders, like a combat sergeant in a WWII flick bracing a fearful rookie before the big battle. "Come on, Louie, knock it off. You are not a jinx. You're letting your pessimism run away with you. Now go get some sleep so we can get an early start. And no more booze!"

He left, looking not the least reassured. It took me longer than usual to drop off into slumberville that night, and I couldn't help wondering if Louie's squeams were beginning to get to me.

The St. Louis headquarters of Western Properties, Inc. turned out to be a small but serviceable suite, with two side-by-side offices opening onto a reception room. Chauvinistically, we stationed Becca at the reception desk while Louie and I took the private rooms. Once we'd hung our office sign and a few framed cowboy prints and generally made ourselves at home, it was time for our first sortie against the target. This took the form of a phone call to KBMO, with me doing the honors since I was president of the company and—thanks to my Western Film Festival scam of glorious memory—knew the most about old shoot-'em-ups. I sat at my executive desk and made the pitch while Becca and Louie eavesdropped on extensions.

"May I speak to Mr. Blair, please . . . Well, if he's in conference I'll speak to Mr. McKenna . . . Good morning, sir. My name is John J. Terwilliger. I am president of Western Properties, Inc., a California corporation that owns the rights to the works of some of America's leading storytellers. Ah, have you heard of our company before?" I would have fainted from shock if McKenna had said yes, but his answer, in a decidedly prunelike voice, was that the name was new to him.

"Among the works we own," I went on, "are the original Rio Kid stories by the late J. F. Carewe." I went on with a concise statement of the copyright quirk which gave my company exclusive control over the public-domain Rio Kid movies starring John West.

A series of incoherent splutters from the other end had been punctuating my harangue, but finally Mac got a grip on himself and broke in on my monologue. "Just who the hell do you think you are?"

"Your station has broadcast several hours of old Western films each week for the past nine or ten months, including the Rio Kid series. Since John West's recent death you've run a Rio Kid every

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weeknight. Miss Carewe could have sued you for copyright infringement at any time, and my company now stands in her shoes. Are you prepared to pay us a substantial cash settlement for prior infringements and enter into a licensing contract with us so that we will be paid royalties on all future broadcasts?"

"I'm prepared to kick you straight into hell," McKenna riposted furiously, and slammed down his phone with an eardrum-numbing clatter.

Having done likewise, though more sedately, I gave Louie and Becca thumbs-up. "The game's underway. McKenna's bound to report the call to Blair right away. Blair will consult the station's lawyers and the lawyers will order a copyright search to confirm that we own the rights. Then he'll be in touch with us," I predicted, "hat in hand."

"So what do we do until then?" Becca asked from her perch on the receptionist's desk.

"As you please, my sweet. Shop your heart out. But you, Louie, stay thirsty till I say you can drink. Understood?"

The three of us took turns manning, or should I say personing, the Western Properties office during the next week. It was a quiet, lonely existence. I bought a Japanese miniature TV, lugged it to the office, and caught up with an abundance of game shows and old movies during my tours of duty. Becca, judging from the classy outfits she wore to her shift each day, was buying clothes by the carload. Louie spent his off-hours God knows where, but his breath and walk satisfied me that at least it wasn't in bars.

Eight days after my phone call to KBMO, just when I was beginning to believe he was going to stonewall, he called. "This is Mr. Blair," he began in a deep operatic baritone. "Bradford Lockwood Blair the Second, general manager of Channel 39. Is this Mr. Terwilliger?"

I acknowledged that it was, my adrenalin pumping.

"I want to meet with you as soon as possible," he boomed. "We have business to discuss."

"My schedule's light this afternoon, sir," I replied with a politeness that I hope disguised my elation. "How would three P.M. be, here at our office?" It never hurts to lure the enemy onto your own turf—Milo's Maxim #43.

The reception committee that awaited its guest in the office at

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three consisted of Napoleon Jimson for legal advice, Becca for brightening the atmosphere, and me, the handsome one in the middle, for hard bargaining. Louie had been out of touch all day, even though I'd called the hotel and left him a message, and I was afraid he was prematurely celebrating with a bottle. We expected just the head honcho, not a war party, so I was rather floored when 3:06 brought a forceful knock at the outer door, and on Becca's call to enter, a quartet of determined faces and bodies trooped in.

Three were male and the unbelievably scrumptious fourth was female. Even before the introductions, carried out sans handshakes, I'd pinned the right name to each visitor. Bradford the Two was the tall thick-chested sandyhead in his early thirties who looked like the American Siegfried in a $500 suit. The fortyish one with the dyspeptic puss and the pipe never out of his mouth was obviously the ex-station manager, Jerome McKenna. The sex fantasy had to be Susan Otis, and the third man, the one she looked at with bedroom eyes when she thought no one was watching, I rightly deduced was her current lover, program director David Wilkes. We found chairs for the quartet, passed around coffee in styrofoam cups, and began haggling.

"Surely you know those Rio Kid films have nothing in common with Carewe's stories except the name," pruneface McKenna insisted as he refilled his pipe with cherry-flavored tobacco.

"And that is totally irrelevant to my client's position," thundered Napoleon Jimson. "Read the cases I cited. Personally I think the company should demand that those disgusting Rio Kid films be banned from the air." John West had not been known for sympathizing with civil-rights causes, and Jimson seemed to be enjoying the prospect of symbolically getting even. "Although my client will not go so far, when this matter is settled I may file another petition with the FCC to take away your license not only for discriminatory hiring and promotion practices but also for broadcasting racist movies."

A born diplomat, that lawyer of ours.

Suddenly David Wilkes, an obvious John West fan, lunged to his feet with his face rage-pale and took two steps in Jimson's direction. Bradford the Two flung an arm around his program director and tried to sit him down again. "Easy, Dave, we can handle it." And Wilkes roared, "That guy is pulling the same trick he tried in that other FCC thing," which in turn launched Jimson to his feet like a black torpedo aimed at Wilkes so that before mayhem erupted I

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had to fling an arm around my legal adviser. Just a nice friendly negotiating session. Blair finally sent Wilkes back to the station and I sent Jimson back to his office and an atmosphere of relative calm was restored.

"That outburst of Jimson's was a farce," Blair orated in his full-throated baritone. "He knows KBMO has the best equal employment opportunity figures of any station in the area. Blacks, women, ex-convicts, the handicapped—we've hired them all and we're proud of them all. Look, Terwilliger, we don't want protracted litigation over a bunch of old cowboy movies. Suppose the station pays you five thousand and you give us a release from all past claims and a license for unlimited future use of the Rio Kid package and any other public-domain films based on literary works you now or may hereafter own?"

I set down my styrofoam cup and pinned the bronze god with a businessman's stare. "Five thousand's fine for settling past claims, but we'll want three thousand a year to license future broadcasts." In my fantasies I looked ahead to the time when stations in a hundred or more cities would be shelling out that amount to our corporation, and I tried to suppress a beatific smile.

McKenna unmouthed his pipe and aimed the stem at Blair. "Western Theater is pulling in the ratings now, Brad, but without the Rio Kid it could become a disaster."

"Figure a seven percent drop in total advertising revenues without them," Susan Otis chimed in. I attributed the worried look in her smoky blue eyes not to her prediction but to concern about Wilkes.

As the trio conferred I could almost see their brainwheels grinding. How much in legal fees would it cost the station if we sued for copyright infringement? Would a settlement keep Jimson from filing another petition with the FCC? Blair and Otis and McKenna huddled and conversed in whispers while Becca and I played pokerface. When the huddle broke up, Blair rose and approached our corner.

"Your terms are acceptable," he said, as gravely as Lee at Appomattox. Then he smiled at Becca, who had said not a word throughout the session, as if to thank her for breaking the impasse, and maybe—if I wasn't misreading his look—to suggest that he'd like to thank her in a more private and intimate way. "Of course, we'll have to consult again with our law firm in Washington before we sign anything. Look, why don't we meet at the station, say Friday at three P.M., and have a signing ceremony? Bring your standard contract and have all your officers present. Meanwhile I'll have

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Dave make a list of all the Westerns in our vault so we can add a rider to the agreement covering any other public-domain pictures based on prior literary matter. I don't want to go through this with you people again."

It all seemed so absurdly easy, I thought, now that it was over. We engaged in a round of handshaking as we parted and I noticed that young Siegfried seemed to hang onto Becca's dainty digits longer than the occasion called for. When they were gone we hugged each other in an ecstasy of glee. "We did it!" I crowed. "Easy Street from now on. Let's find a bar and toast the victory."

We made it a quick one, then headed back to the office to call Jimson and report success. He agreed to join us at KBMO's offices at 3:00 P.M. Friday for the signing.

It wasn't until we were locking up that a sobering thought penetrated my buoyant mood. "Becca," I said as we waited in the corridor for a down elevator, "why did Blair want all of us for this signing ceremony Friday? As president of Western Properties I'm the only one whose signature's needed."

"I can't see any harm in it," she said brightly. "Maybe he wants to turn it into a media event." Then she bit down on her underlip as if she had thought of an even tougher question.

"Hey, Milo," she asked me worriedly, "what ever happened to our wonderful partner Louie?"

At exactly 5:14 the next morning by the traveling clock on my bedside table, her question was answered. I was jolted awake from lovely dreams by a loud tapping at the door, a frenzied tattoo that would have turned my nerves raw in two minutes. I cursed, kicked off blankets, and approached the door stealthily, knowing all too well who and what was on the other side.

"Let me in!" came Louie's unmistakable croak. Afraid his drumbeat would awaken everyone on my floor, I unbolted and dodged back as he lurched in.

"I don't have to ask where you've been," I said, sniffing his breath. "The meeting with Blair turned out to be a success, but we were lucky and your getting blotto could have blown the whole scam. I'll never work with you again."

"You only think you know where I've been," Louie muttered darkly. "Sure, I had some drinks this afternoon, maybe this evening. In fact, I was in the bar downstairs around eleven tonight. But I'll prove to you I wasn't drunk! You know who I saw sneaking out of

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the hotel about eleven thirty? Your little partner, that's who. So drunky Louie got suspicious and tailed her. She cabbed out to a luxury high-rise condominium in the Central West End and took the private elevator to the penthouse." He stopped for breath, eyed the unopened bourbon bottle on my dresser top longingly. "Now guess who lives in that penthouse?"

Given the sexy signals I'd witnessed during the afternoon's bargaining session, I hardly needed to guess. "Young Beefcake. Bradford Lockwood Blair the Second," I replied knowingly, a display that left Louie's mouth agape.

"She stayed till half an hour ago," Louie went on when he'd recovered. "I followed her back here just now. Oh, God, why did I set up this scam? It's like the others, bagworms all over it."

"Calm down," I told him. "Look, so they get together. They're young, single, and healthy. Why go puritan all of a sudden?"

"The thing's coming apart," he mourned. "I feel it coming apart." He didn't stop prophesying doom until I'd fed him three shots of bourbon and put him to sleep stretched across a pair of armchairs. But his paranoia had infected me, and I spent the tail of the night wide-awake.

A little before 11:00 A.M. I rang her room, one floor below mine, and from the weariness in her hello I gathered I'd awakened her. "Four hours to our date at KBMO," I said. "Rise and shine. We have a problem I have to talk over with you in a hurry. See you in half a minute."

I left Louie snoring on his armchairs, locked the room door behind me, slipped down the firestairs, and tapped gently at her door. She opened, wearing an ankle-length caftan that concealed none of her attributes. "Okay, princess," I said once inside. "Level with Uncle Milo. Why did you spend five hours at Blair's condo last night?"

A corner of her lovely mouth began to twitch. "Oh, that," she laughed softly. "Well, you must have noticed at the meeting yesterday how he was sort of sending me signals. And you must admit he's a gorgeous hunk of man, besides being the son of a multimillionaire. He, ah, called me late last night and invited me over."

"You were seen," I told her without explaining by whom, and gave her my businessman's stare. "Never again, kid. Understand? You've been in the life long enough to know it was a rotten idea. In a tender moment you might have let something slip that would have shot the scam to pieces."

Her deep brown eyes glazed over with a cat-full-of-cream look.

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"Milo, he is by far the best I've ever met," she said softly. "Oh, if there were only some way I could marry him I'd chuck the life and be happy ever after."

"Yeah," I said. "Until his old man had your background checked. Remember what I said—never again."

On that happy note a chastened Becca, a sullen Louie, and an increasingly apprehensive Milo picked up Napoleon Jimson at his Broadway office after lunch and made our way to the studios of KBMO-TV and our appointment with destiny.

It was a one-story tan-brick building a block west of Twelfth Boulevard, with a transmitting tower poking into the sky in its back yard. The receptionist deposited us in a parquet-floored waiting room where we sat in soft chairs and listened to the noisy electric wall clock. The hands showed 3:00. No one came to greet us. I picked up a discarded *Globe-Democrat* from a lamp table and read about how the secretaries in all the federal offices in St. Louis were staging a massive demonstration that afternoon, protesting having to make coffee for the men. The next most exciting story dealt with the annual meeting of the Mortgage Bankers Association which was to open that evening at the Cervantes Convention Center. Obviously a slow day for news.

The clock's hands reached 3:10, and still we sat. I began to feel a return of the squeams.

At 3:12 Jerome McKenna poked his pruneface and pipestem into the room. "Sorry for the delay," he said. "Dave's still working on that list of other public-domain Westerns and Brad's in conference with somebody. Okay if we make it 3:20?" He didn't wait for answers or comments but ducked out again. Louie resumed his symphony for cracked knuckles, Jimson rose and stalked the room like a black tiger, and I started asking myself some unnerving questions. What was going on in this joint? Why was Blair with parties unknown when he should have been with us? Why had he insisted on all four of us attending this soirée? Why had Becca so unprofessionally spent most of last night with him? *Milo, Milo,* the voice of common sense reassured me. *Relax, man! This operation happens to be legal.*

And then, at 3:16 by the wall clock, I realized that on one hypothesis the deal was blatantly illegal, and my spine suddenly felt like an icicle in August.

That was when Louie jumped up and said he had to visit the men's room and walked out. Leaving three of us. Two minutes later Becca

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smiled, said something about locating a coffee machine, and walked out. Leaving two of us. At 3:23 Louie came back and as if on signal Jimson stormed out into the hallway, saying he would find Blair and demand that we be seen.

I had better do a spot of exploring myself, I decided. "Sit," I instructed a hand-wringing Louie, and went out to the hallway and very gingerly began walking. The place was a maze of corridors and cubbyholes. I followed what looked like a major artery, past a locked double door that seemed to lead out to a loading dock. Past a closed door marked *DAVID WILKES PROGRAM DIRECTOR*, with the johns right across the hall from Wilkes' cubicle. The corridor ended at a half-open door labeled *FILM STORAGE* but I could see another half-open door at the room's far end, so I started to walk through. I felt like a soldier behind enemy lines.

The film-storage room was crammed library-style with high steel shelves that bulged with cardboard cartons, each holding a 16-millimeter film print. The vault was stone-quiet, the narrow aisles between the shelves were empty.

Except the last one.

I threw a glance down that aisle. There was a man in shirt-sleeves lying on his side on the floor. He didn't look as if he were taking a nap. I tiptoed over and bent down to inspect the face. It was David Wilkes. The vacant stare of his eyes told me he was dead. A long sharp knife, the kind used as a letter opener, lay on the linoleum six inches from the body, the blade reddish-brown and sticky halfway to the hilt.

A ballpoint pen was clutched in Wilkes's right hand and a pile of white 8½ x 5½ halfsheets lay scattered around the body. I remembered McKenna's remark that David hadn't finished inventorying the Westerns—which suggested that pruneface had seen Wilkes bare minutes before the murder, or perhaps that he'd killed the program director himself—and looked down at the halfsheets again, forty or so in all. Ten or twelve looked blank. On each of the others that I could read without moving them, the title of a single horse opera was printed in sloppy block capitals. The one on which Wilkes's pen rested read MARSHAL OF LARAMIE. I noticed SMOKEY SMITH and WHERE TRAILS END on others nearby.

My thoughts, however, were not on old movies but new suspects. At first glance the likeliest candidate was McKenna, who had lost Susan Otis to the deceased. But it might also have been Ms. Otis herself—lovers do quarrel—or Bradford the Two, who might have

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wanted Susan for himself or might have blamed Wilkes, initiator of the idea for Western Theater, for the debacle with my company.

Then I glanced down again at the halfsheet directly underneath Wilkes's pen. And suddenly I didn't have to speculate further, because I knew.

By pure luck I found verification only a few feet away. One of the steel shelves in that aisle was being used as a sort of film-book reference library. I almost gasped with glee when I noticed among the twenty-odd titles Adams and Rainey's *Shoot-em-Ups*, a comprehensive listing of the casts and credits of every talking Western film ever made in the United States. With sweaty hands I thumbed through the alphabetical index of titles at the back of the book.

Marshal of Heldorado, Marshal of Laredo, Marshal of Mesa City—I was right. There was no such film as *Marshal of Laramie.*

Like an outlaw being chased by one of those marshals, I ran. Back through the storage room, along the corridor to the loading dock, out and away, until I'd lost myself in the cavernous darkness of Stadium Cinema II where I spent the rest of the afternoon.

When the show let out I did the only sensible thing left to me. I bought a cheap suitcase at Woolworth's, filled it with copies of the evening *Post-Dispatch,* cabbed back to Stouffer's Riverfront Inn, and—with the help of one of the paper identities I always carry for emergencies—checked in all over again where the cops would least expect to find me.

"And how long do you intend to stay, Mr. Rhodes?" the clerk inquired as she completed the registration card.

"Just for the meeting of the Mortgage Bankers Association," I said, taking the room key.

The weekend papers carried enough of the story to confirm my deductions all the way. The cops had Jimson and were investigating his role in the scam, but I was confident he could prove we had scammed him too. They didn't have Louie, who according to the KBMO receptionist had exited the waiting room and walked unopposed out the front door within a minute after I'd left on my own excursion. And of course they had Becca. But, as I explained Sunday morning over the lobby phone to the disembodied voice of Jock Schultz half a continent away, she didn't really count.

"Remember the ex-CIA spook I used to tap a phone on that scam I ran here four years ago? I had him bug the St. Louis FBI office Friday night. It cost me a pile but confirmed my suspicions all the

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way. Becca's not one of us. She's a sort of free-lance bounty hunter, working under a deal that pays her so many thousand for each major operator she can hang a Federal rap on."

"Bounty hunter," Jock repeated thoughtfully. "Appropriate character in a Western film scam, wouldn't you say?"

"I suspected something like that at the TV station Friday when I asked myself how our plan could possibly be illegal. That was how I realized that if Becca had never gotten Carolyn Carewe to sign over the rights to the Rio Kid stories—say, if Becca had forged the old lady's name—well, all she'd need to do later would be to testify at our trial that the forgery was part of our scam, and Louie and I would never be able to convince a jury it was she who did it. They'd nail us for copyright fraud, wire fraud, conspiracy, and God knows what else.

"As soon as we hit St. Louis she contacted Blair, told him what was up, and they worked out the charade to lure us all to KBMO where the FBI would arrest us as soon as we'd signed the contract. That's why she visited Blair's condo Thursday night—strategy, not sex. If that Federal secretaries' demonstration hadn't made the agents late for their date to collar us at the station, Louie and I would be in the slammer this minute. Thank heaven for militant feminism!" I declaimed piously.

"So *that's* how the Feds got Fats Adamo for mail fraud so soon after the Disco Cola scam," the Jock sighed. "Milo, me buck, I feel devilish guilty that I recommended the lady to ye and I'll make it up when the heat is lowered. Now what about this Wilkes murder?"

"A mere bagatelle," I replied modestly. "I solved it thirty seconds after I found the body. You see, all it took was the tying together of five facts. One: Louie got out of the Federal pen six months ago. Two: Wilkes joined KBMO about a year ago. Three: The station has a liberal policy about hiring blacks, women, *and ex-convicts*. Four: Before Becca and I flew here, Louie thought he saw someone he knew from when he was in the South and calling himself Hal O'Flynn—an encounter that took place on Twelfth Boulevard, a few blocks from KBMO. Five: At no time before our Friday visit to the station had Wilkes set eyes on Louie in this city. During the bargaining session which Wilkes attended, Louie was off somewhere getting plastered.

"It's easy enough to reconstruct what happened Friday afternoon. On his way to the john Louie had to pass Wilkes's office just as I did. It was both their misfortunes that this time Wilkes did see

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Louie and recognized him as a fellow Lexington alumnus. Now remember, Blair was the only one at KBMO who knew about Becca's trap for us. It's obvious from what McKenna told us in that waiting room that he didn't know, and it's clear Wilkes didn't know or he wouldn't have gone on inventorying those Westerns as if they really mattered. So, Wilkes recognized Louie and apparently inveigled him into the film-storage room for a quiet chat.

"Louie was already nervous as a cat. Meeting a fellow con in that station was the last straw. He panicked, saw the paper knife they kept in the storage room to open cardboard film containers, and used it. Then he went to the john to wash the blood off his hands. But as soon as he left the men's room he got his directions confused, wandered back into the storage room—and found that Wilkes had not died instantly but had been able, after Louie left for the john, to begin to write on a black halfsheet the only one of Louie's many names he knew his murderer by, HAL OFLYNN, with the apostrophe being omitted for obvious reasons of haste. He'd gotten as far as the L of the last name when he died.

"I give Louie credit for quick thinking under pressure. He had only seconds to act. If he'd tried to flush the halfsheet down the toilet he might have been interrupted at any moment. So instead he took Wilkes's pen and simply added enough block capitals to each end of the dying message so that it would look just like the name of another Western—MARS*HAL OF L*ARAMIE!"

"He was a prophet in one respect at least," the Jock pointed out. "The scam had bagworms all over it."

"A drunk, a jinx, a prophet, and for one split second a genius," I said. "I hope the poor schnook gets away."

Six months later—long after I had slipped out of St. Louis, sworn off John West movies, and retired to lick my wounds in solitude—I happened to pick up a copy of *Persons* in a New Orleans dentist's office. My eye was caught by a photo spread of a newlywed couple. The man was tall, thick-chested, sandy-haired, and resembled an American Siegfried. His bride was tall, in her late twenties, of form divine, smiling and radiant in white lace.

Son of a gun, I said to myself. She chucked the life and landed Young Beefcake after all.

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a *NEW* short-short by

ROBERT L. FISH

How the most beautiful woman in the world corrected a mistake of the past, an error committed when she was less experienced and less resourceful . . .

THE BOOBY TRAP

by ROBERT L. FISH

Marylyn Burrows, née Gorham, was the most beautiful woman in the world. Unfortunately she was also completely unphotogenic, so a career as a photographic model or a screen actress seemed ruled out. Producers who saw her on the streets of Hollywood were inclined to rush her before cameras for screen tests even before making other proposals, but the tests were invariably disasters, and so Marylyn ended up a sort of combination sometimes-receptionist, often coffee-maker, and general message-carrier at Perplexed Studios because it would have been a shame not to have someone that lovely around where the producers, directors, and executives of Perplexed Studios could just look at her.

Marylyn Burrows considered herself one of the unluckiest women in the world, and not just because her beauty was such that it could not be translated by a camera lens onto film. Her major complaint with fate was that when she had first come to work at Perplexed Studios she had been taken with one Johnny Burrows, a handsome stuntman on the studio lot. They had been struck with each other's physical attributes at once and shortly thereafter they married. One month after the nuptials Johnny had the misfortune of being in a bad accident.

It seems they were filming a sequence in which Johnny was supposed to take a horse at high speed across a railroad crossing inches

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ahead of a speeding train. Of course the scene was being filmed at very slow speed so that when it appeared on the screen it would look as if the narrow escape was much narrower than it actually was; but even so when Johnny's horse—a new addition to the stables at Perplexed Studios and probably not as well trained as it might have been—saw all those succulent daisies on the railroad track between the rails and skidded to a halt to investigate, the charging train knocked both the horse and Johnny a goodly distance.

The worst part was that the horse landed on Johnny and when they had unscrambled him from the horse—whose name is not recorded—the horse was sent to the glue factory and Johnny was permanently crippled. In addition, his face, once so handsome, was now something to frighten Lon Chaney.

At this point Marylyn decided she had married too young, and to the wrong man. Unfortunately for Marylyn, "in sickness and in health" included "in accident" as well; and incompatibility being something that two must agree to, there was nothing Marylyn could do to become free. Johnny would not hear of a divorce.

In addition, Johnny Burrows was a jealous man. He not only wanted to know where Marylyn was at all times when she was not at home, even telephoning the studio during working hours to confirm that she was, indeed, there, but he also had the habit of going through her purse with or without her permission, and opening every package she came home with, searching for evidence that Marylyn was cheating on him. Which she would gladly have done in an instant had she been able to figure out how to do it and get away with it; but she did not want to take the chance that Johnny who, though ugly and crippled, still had hands the size of manhole covers, might do something drastic to that beauty which was the only thing she had left.

Marylyn knew she had a few minor faults: her memory was not too good and she often forgot where she had put things; but basically she considered herself resourceful, so when a certain head technician in the special-effects department began giving her long side-glances in the studio cafeteria, Marylyn decided to use what she—and she alone—considered her great intelligence to resolve her problem. One day she went to this technician as he sat in the cafeteria, drew up a chair, and sat down, allowing him a goodly glimpse of her cleavage as she did so. She blinked her huge eyes at him a few times and led him skillfully into conversation.

"I saw *Mission Impossible* last night," she began.

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"Oh?" said the technician, putting aside his Danish, pleased to have a common interest with this lovely. "So did I."

This confused Marylyn for several moments, because she had invented the scene she was about to describe. But then, after several moments, she saw her way out of her dilemma and was pleased with herself for this confirmation of her brain power.

"Oh," she said, "this wasn't a regular *Mission Impossible.* This was a re-run."

"So was mine."

"I mean," Marylyn said, determined not to give up, "this was a re-run real late at night. Or early in the morning, I don't recall. On an out-of-town station, I don't remember which one."

"Oh," said the technician.

"Anyways," Marylyn went on, relieved at her escape, "in this episode they have a scene where Greg Morris rigs up this gizmo that looks like a woman's purse, only when it is snapped open it blows up in the face of the snapper-opener. Is a gizmo like that possible?"

"Anything along those lines is possible," the technician said expansively, pleased to be having this unexpected but delightful conversation with the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and also to be able to demonstrate his expertise. "The only thing with *Mission Impossible* is that when Peter Graves asks Greg Morris for a gizmo that's complicated, like something from a Sci-Fi job—to float a man through prison bars with thought waves or something—Greg Morris rigs it up in a few seconds. If we were doing the same thing in our special-effects department, it would take weeks, if not months."

Marylyn was appalled.

"You mean it would take months to rig up my purse—*a* purse, I mean—to blow up in the face of whoever opened it?"

"Oh, no," the technician said, tolerant of this ignorance. "To rig up a purse is duck soup. You could rig it to give out a loud bang and scare the living—scare the daylights out of him. Or her, or whoever opened the thing. Like those books that have a dirty title and inside there's just a mousetrap—"

"How about something stronger?" Marylyn asked.

"You mean, give out something like a blast of smoke as well as a bang? Scare the clown and make him look like the end man in a minstrel show at the same time? Halloween stuff?" He waved a hand deprecatingly. "Sure. Easy. No problem."

"I mean something to make him look like that car after the viaduct

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fell on it in *Earthquake*," Marylyn said firmly. "Like the pilot of the plane must have looked after King Kong slapped him from the Empire State Building and he fell a hundred floors to the street. Something like that. Can it be done?"

"Yeah, it could be done," the technician said doubtfully. "But—"

"And how long would it take to rig up my purse—I mean, *a* purse—the way I'm talking about?"

"Time isn't the problem," the technician said in a worried tone. "It's accounting for the dynamite—"

Marylyn gave him her most enticing look; it made the technician dizzy with desire. "I'm sure you could do it," she said in a husky voice. "A man in your position, and with your talent. And I would be most grateful. Most . . ."

The technician swallowed. "You really want me to rig up a purse with dynamite? *Dynamite?*"

"Is there anything stronger?" Marylyn asked.

"Sure, but it would be even harder to get and harder to account for."

Marylyn sighed, making the sacrifice. "Then I guess dynamite will have to do." She thought a moment. "But better make it two sticks, not one."

The technician was staring at her in confused silence, his mind blank to everything except her exceptional beauty. Marylyn ran her fingernail ever so lightly across the back of his hand. He shivered.

"And how long would it take?" she asked softly, caressingly.

"What?"

"I said, how long would it take to rig a purse with a couple of sticks of dynamite?" Marylyn asked, trying to keep the steel out of her voice.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was thinking about something else," the technician said, coming down to earth. "About an hour is all. Once I get hold of a purse, that is."

"Why don't you use mine?" Marylyn suggested helpfully. "And I'll see you in an hour or so." She came to her feet, gave him a most promising smile, and walked from the cafeteria with the proper sway of her lovely hips.

There were many things for Marylyn Burrows, née Gorham, to think about on her way home that evening. Her purse, heavier than usual by the addition of two sticks of dynamite and a detonator attached to the clasp, lay on the seat beside her as she drove.

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First she would resume her maiden name, Gorham; change jobs; and probably never tell anyone she was ever married to Johnny Burrows. With her memory being what it was, she was sure that she herself would forget the ill-fated marriage in a short time, especially when she wasn't being reminded of it every day by the poor crippled creature who had once been Johnny Burrows.

Without Johnny, life would be a ball! There would be other men, many men, successful, handsome men she could marry. With Johnny out of the picture she could use her beauty and her brains in a way a younger, more wide-eyed, less experienced and less resourceful Marylyn had never been able to do.

She sighed and pulled the car into the darkened driveway. There was a light in the living room; through the curtains that covered the wide window she could see the shadow of Johnny sitting in a chair with the lamp lit behind him. Poor Johnny, she suddenly thought. We had some good times before the accident, although I can't say I remember any of them in detail. But if Johnny only looked like his shadow, instead of the way he really looks with his torn body and gruesome face! At least, she thought with a sudden rush of tenderness, let him see me for the last time as beautiful as I am! I shall make an entrance!

And she reached for her purse and her house-key—

"Q"

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a *NEW* Uncle Abner story by

JOHN F. SUTER

Uncle Abner, with the counsel of the Lord, could penetrate the heart of most earthly mysteries. But Uncle Abner knew there were mysteries beyond man's power to unravel. In this case of the gold box and its awe-inspiring provenance, Uncle Abner had to judge between truth and falsehood, and in so doing try to remedy a great injustice . . .

THE WISE MEN'S GOLD

by JOHN F. SUTER

My Uncle Abner often remarked that in a man's dwelling on this earth he might encounter some things which were inexplicable mysteries. If the man were wise enough to seek counsel of the Lord, he might come to see that these were not mysteries at all.

Yet, my uncle conceded, there might come a time when a complete revelation would not be made. This was because there would always be some mysteries which men were never intended to penetrate.

It was a day in late October when my father sent me to Randolph's house with some old family letters. I knew that they contained mention of some persons Randolph was attempting to trace, but it was of little importance to me. The day of Thanksgiving was but a few weeks away, and my thoughts were on the family feast. I was entering my teens, and I was all appetite.

I had not expected to see Uncle Abner in Randolph's office, which had not yet been moved to the courthouse, but I was not surprised. Each one often sought the other's opinion.

I was not to hear them discuss anything at this time. I had barely stepped inside the office when I heard footsteps behind me. Both Randolph and my uncle looked past me.

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"Your pardon," a rasping voice said. "Would you be Squire Randolph?"

The visitor had evidently addressed the right man, for Randolph answered. "I am. Come in."

I turned about. The man behind me was dressed in rough sailor's clothes. His garb was clean and neat. He had a deeply tanned face, with thick black hair and a short black beard. The skin at his eyes was wrinkled into crow's-feet.

Randolph motioned to me to bring him the letters while he studied his visitor.

"My name's Sid Wainwright, gentlemen," the seaman said, advancing to the side of Randolph's desk. "I have a favor to ask, or a bargain to offer. I hope you'll listen to a plain-spoken man."

"A plain-spoken man is the easiest understood," Uncle Abner replied.

"Well, then," said Wainwright, "I'll get to it. I'm bound for California, and I'm in need of more money. I was told that I might come to see Squire Randolph if I had something to sell."

Randolph puffed out his cheeks and let them in again. "Your informant makes it sound as though I would buy anything. He is wrong. However, I will look at your goods and give you a fair answer."

The dark man nodded. "I can't ask better than that."

In his left hand he was carrying something wrapped in a gaudy bandanna. He placed the parcel in a cleared space on Randolph's desk and laid his right hand clumsily on it. With his left hand, which was curiously scarred from the wrist to near the forefinger, he opened the bundle.

Standing in the middle of the cloth was a gold box perhaps six inches long, four wide, and a few inches high. It was ornamented with characters strange to me. It had several small dents in it, and it looked much-handled.

Even I had seen more than one box, but all of us stared at it as though no other box had ever existed.

"A magic casket," mused Randolph, reaching out a large hand and opening the box.

It was as though he had freed some inner light from a long imprisonment. The glow of a fire can promise to sustain not only the flesh without but the spirit within. To look inside the box was to experience that same promise.

"Magic, indeed," said Randolph, gently closing the lid. "If I ex-

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amine this too long, I might forget that there is business involved. Very well, what do you claim the metal is, and where did you get it?"

Wainwright smiled, showing white teeth. "I doubt that you can't recognize gold, Squire. As to your other question, I got it in Egypt."

Seeing a gleam come into Randolph's eye, he went on, "You'll ask me what I paid, and I must tell you that it was a gift."

"Have you ever had it valued?" asked Uncle Abner.

"There have been those who have made guesses," Wainwright replied. "I'll not discuss that. Either of you gentlemen make me an offer. If it's less than I need, I'll make you a price."

Randolph was about to speak, when my uncle put a hand on his arm.

"Wainwright, your box turns our attention away from other questions. You are a sailor, and you say you are bound for California. Why do you not sign on at Baltimore or some other port and work your passage?"

The seaman held up his right hand. The thumb was missing. Glossy, pinkish skin formed a great scar where it had been.

"It's little I could do except swab decks or man the galley. I ended my last voyage eight months ago. I want to go to California and farm where the soil is rich and the settlers ain't too thick yet."

Abner was satisfied with this answer, but he was not finished. "Still, you came here to sell your box, in a place where ready money is not easy to find. Why not along the seaboard where there is more wealth?"

Wainwright was not confused by the question. "Because I had been told that there was good land here, and prosperity. I have no taste for rounding the Horn again if I could do as well in western Virginia. Besides, unspent passage money would give me more for land."

Abner studied him with curiosity. "Have you been to see Andrew Rowell? He has a fondness for such things as this. He also has some good acreage which he is not keeping as it should be kept."

The sailor grimaced. "I met the man this morning. He treated me like a beggar. He refused to sell any land, and he offered only a trifle for the box."

Randolph smiled without humor. "He is consistent, I see."

"Yet he must spend some money," my uncle said. "We have seen his collection. There are valuable pieces there."

"Some of them could be stolen goods," growled Wainwright.

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Abner's craggy chin came up, and he stared at the man.

"What sort of man was your last captain, Wainwright?" he asked.

The seaman struck the desk with his left hand. "Not fit to command a decent ship, I'll tell ye that! Work ye like a dog, short the whole crew but the First Mate on their rations, change the rules so's ye never were sure what they were, find excuses for dockin' yer pay—I could go on, but that's not what I came for."

"No," said Abner, "you came to sell a gold box."

Wainwright glowered at him. "Were you tryin' to throw me off, so's I'd cut the price?"

Randolph picked up the box. "None of us here is unfair to any man. What are you asking?"

"Three hundred," the sailor replied calmly.

Randolph tapped on the side of the box and looked at Abner. He got no help. My uncle's face showed neither approval nor disapproval.

Wainwright watched the hesitation. "Squire, you doubt me? You question that it's gold? I swear it."

He touched the box. "Gold. That it is. There's more to it, besides. There's what box it's supposed to be. But I can't swear to the truth of that. I can only tell you what was told to me."

The sailor took a deep breath. "Well—first, you must know how I came by it. I'll make it short. We were in port in Alexandria in Egypt. Not the best, nor yet the worst. I was on shore leave, and I happened to save a man from three rascals bent on cutting him to little pieces. It turned out he was a merchant worth a lot of money.

"He insisted that he had to give me something. I thought that fair enough. He took me into a room behind his shop. All full of everything y' ever see in one o' their bazaars. He rummaged in a chest that seemed full o' junk and came out with this box.

"Then he asked me a funny thing. Was I Nazrani, he wanted to know. Was I a Christian, he meant. There are better ones, yes, but I admitted to it. At that, he put the box in my hands.

" 'This box,' he said, 'was brought to Prophet Jeshua when he was baby in Bethlehem.' "

Randolph was puzzled. "Jeshua?"

Wainwright explained, "Jesus. In that man's religion, Jesus is Jeshua and a mighty prophet."

Uncle Abner looked at the box. "Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This is the gold—or a part of it, you say."

"That is what I say," he shrugged. "That is what he told me."

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"No, what you say is a lie!" a big voice boomed. "Such a thing could never come into the hands of a man like you!"

We all turned. Our attention had been so fastened on the casket that we were unaware that someone else had been standing at the door.

He was a big, old man, humbly dressed, his boots and the bottoms of his trousers flecked with mud. He was Adam Bird, a traveling preacher who went into the hills where the churches either were lowly or did not exist. He was quick to pass judgment, and he could not be swerved until he had given it. He was not so stiff-necked, however, that he would not yield if a fair counter-argument was made.

Abner studied the old preacher's stormy countenance.

"Adam," he said, "have you knowledge of this thing?"

"Only that the Lord would not let such an object be owned by ordinary men. Not by you, not by Randolph. Certainly not by a thief."

"A thief? You must show me one," said Abner. "As to ownership, the Ark of the Covenant was held by the Philistines once."

"And a plague was visited on them until it was returned," retorted the old preacher. "Finally it was seen in God's temple by Saint John in his great vision. And that is where the wise men's gold must be. Not here, in the hands of a thief."

"Adam," said Abner, "you are acting without proof. We are told that this box came from Egypt. It could have been taken there by the Holy Family."

Bird opened his mouth, but Abner went on firmly. "The child was only a baby, and the family had to live in a strange land. I see nothing odd in the gold's being intended for just that purpose."

"It is not written that it happened," grumbled Bird.

"It is not written that it did not happen," Abner replied. "I cannot pronounce judgment. I am sure that you cannot, either." His voice grew harsher.

"But you have called a man a thief. Such an accusation needs to be justified."

The old preacher drew himself up. "Andrew Rowell will spell out the charge when he arrives. He asked me to ride ahead to have Randolph intercept this man."

"Is that all you know?" asked Abner.

"Rowell told me very little," Bird answered. "He called to me as I rode by. His face was blood-smeared, and I turned in to help him.

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The only help he would accept was my promise to come at once with word of a thief who had taken a gold box from him by force."

"He described the man?" Randolph asked.

"He did." The old man pointed to Wainwright. "That man fits his description."

It was a strange thing to me that Adam Bird had denounced the box first and the sailor second, but he saw things that way. He was the despair of any judge when he appeared as a witness in court. It appeared that Abner had indulged him in order to get to the matter of a theft.

Randolph looked at the seaman, who had not moved. "Wainwright, what do you have to say?"

The dark man was neither cringing nor brazen. "I stole nothing," he said.

"Do you know why Rowell was bloody?" my uncle asked.

"I flattened his nose."

"You raised a hand against him, but you stole nothing," Abner stated.

Wainwright answered in his rasping voice, "If you like, you can add that the scurvy robber broke a chair when he fell on it."

Randolph glanced at the box. "Here is a gold box. We need to hear Rowell's story about it. However, I must ask you to stand and let Abner search you."

The sailor shrugged. "It is nothing to me."

He stood, and Abner searched him, laying his finds before Randolph. There was little except a small amount of money, a clasp knife, a folded paper, and a smaller bit of paper.

I could easily see these things as Abner put them down. He had shown interest in the smaller paper, as had Randolph. When I looked at it, I read, in a poorly written hand, the names of Rowell, Randolph, and those of my own father and Uncle Abner.

Abner opened the folded paper. "A deed," he said. He scanned it, then his eyes narrowed, and he read it again, slowly. He passed it to Randolph.

As Randolph was reading, Abner addressed Wainwright. "The land described in this deed is on the South Branch of the Potomac?"

The sailor nodded.

"The Andrew Rowell who deeded the land is the one you have seen?"

"He is."

"Who is Asa Rogers?"

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"My half-brother."

Adam Bird was looking out of the window. Suddenly he lifted his arm. "Here is Rowell now, tying his horse."

My uncle beckoned me to him. "Martin," he said in an undertone, "I might need to send you to get something from your father. It will be time enough to tell you what it is when I ask for it." He turned to Randolph. "It would be wise to return Wainwright's possessions."

Wainwright had just put his things back in his pockets when Andrew Rowell entered.

The man was a gross creature, the only color about him being his almost scarlet face. He was presumed to be a moneyed man, but the way he neglected the family land around his house was considered a disgrace. The only evidences of money were his prodigious gluttony and the collection of rare and precious objects he kept in a locked room in his house. Otherwise, he carried an aura of grayness, from his unkempt hair to his dark, food-spotted clothing and his rumpled linen. Even when he spoke, his voice had a somber, gray undertone.

He paused on the threshold and surveyed all of us. "Well, Randolph," he said, "I see that Adam Bird reached you in time."

He looked intently at Wainwright, then down at the gold box. "My box. You have that, too."

He stretched out a puffy hand to pick up the golden casket.

"One moment, Rowell," Abner said. "Randolph is thinking of buying that."

In that room, my uncle was the only one not surprised. Rowell went livid, then regained his color. "He's thinking of *buying* it? From a thief?" He turned ponderously toward Randolph. "Is this how you serve the law of Virginia? You buy stolen goods?"

Randolph began to swell as he sometimes did before an outburst, but Abner gave him no chance to speak.

"Randolph has not betrayed his responsibility in any way," he said. "This man Wainwright says he is no thief."

"No thief!" Rowell gasped. "Adam Bird, himself, has seen the violence committed on me when I was robbed."

"Wainwright has admitted the violence without any prompting from us," my uncle answered. "He says that he stole nothing from you."

Rowell swayed on his feet and looked around the room. He saw an unoccupied chair and shuffled to it, lowering himself carefully.

"Adam," he wheezed, "they have paid no attention to you. Tell them how you found me beaten and robbed."

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Adam Bird's face went stubborn. Randolph, himself, might have braced for trouble if he were as directly involved as Rowell was.

"I saw that you had been beaten," Bird snapped. "I did not see it done, nor did I see you robbed. I have only your word for that."

Abner picked up the box. He turned it over and over and opened and closed the lid.

It was still an object of wonder, especially when it was open and the unearthly light emanated from it.

"What would a man do for such a thing?" he asked, not expecting an answer. "If it is what it is supposed to be, what would he do? Even if it is only a gold box and nothing more, what would he do?"

He turned to the sailor. "Wainwright, you claim it. What would you do?"

Wainwright spread his curiously scarred hands. "I would harm no man to get it. I wouldn't steal it. I'm a hard man, but only against those who wrong me. As to the box, you heard how it came to me. You heard why I want to sell it. Land is worth more to me now than pretty things."

"An oily-tongued rascal, isn't he?" Rowell snorted. "Many a rogue from the Baltimore waterfront has never made a wrong step, to hear one of them tell it."

"What were you doing on the Baltimore waterfront?" the sailor asked. His eyes had narrowed.

"I have had business there from time to time," Rowell replied, his tone contemptuous.

"Let it be," Abner said to both of them. "Rowell, what would you do for such a thing as this?"

"I don't know what I must do to get it back," the huge man retorted. "I paid a fair price for it when I bought it. I intend to keep it locked up where it won't be stolen again. As for the Wise Men story, this fellow must have made it up to take you in."

My uncle had listened carefully to everything both men had said. He turned to Wainwright again.

"You have owned the box for some time, have you?"

The seaman nodded his dark head. "I have."

Abner looked at Rowell. "How long have you owned it?"

Rowell stroked his jowls with a flabby hand. "Between two and three years."

"Then both of you should be familiar with it."

Abner closed the lid of the box and his great hand prevented us from seeing most of it.

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"Randolph," he said, "you have paper and pen. Lay them out."

Silently Randolph heeded the request and placed a sheet of paper, a pen, and an inkwell on the table. His actions made the only sounds in the room.

"There are strange markings on this box," Abner remarked. "Most of us have seen them. I ask you, Rowell, and you too, Wainwright, to come forward and draw one of the markings. Any one of them."

Neither disputant stirred. The sailor watched his accuser. Rowell was sweating visibly.

Wainwright raised his thumbless right hand. "It's none too easy for me to draw."

Rowell sat upright and pointed an accusing finger. "Yes. Look at his hands, both of them. Nobody but a rascal would have hands like that. He has been in prison. He was hung up by the thumbs as a punishment for something. Those are the marks."

Wainwright smiled coldly.

"I've had more than one taste of the cat from a slave-driving captain, but I've never been strung up. This happened on my last voyage. I was helping clear a fouled line, when it came free too fast. It burned my left hand and whipped around my right thumb. It took it off before I knew what had happened."

Abner heard him out. He addressed Rowell. "I hear what seems to be an excuse. You must have been waiting for it, Rowell. You may draw now."

The gross man did not look at him. "I have studied that box many times, Abner, but I could not repeat any of the designs. It is not a holy box, as he would have you believe. It is the work of the Father of Lies."

"The Father of Lies!" my uncle exclaimed. "Yes, Rowell, you are right. His hand can indeed be seen in this."

He looked at both men again. "Then neither of you can draw a design from this box?"

Wainwright smiled again, this time in amusement. "I never said I couldn't. I said it's none too easy."

He stepped forward, picked up the pen in his left hand, dipped it into the ink, and began to draw. He was slow, but the lines were quite firm.

I was standing close. When he finished, he had drawn what looked like a daisy, but with more petals. There were three circles in the center, each a little bigger than the one inside it. Around the rim were many petals, all about the same size.

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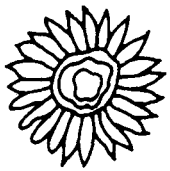

Wainwright handed the paper to Uncle Abner even before the ink had dried. Abner glanced at the drawing, then held up the box and studied it.

"Yes," he said, "there are several of these on the top of the lid."

"Then we know whose box it is!" Adam Bird burst out. "For years, Rowell, I have seen you neglect the land given to your dominion. I have known that you worship false idols in the things you lust after for your locked room. You tried to use me to brand an innocent man a thief. You are a liar and no better than a thief, yourself."

"That was obvious," said Abner. "If this man had robbed Rowell of the box, how did he get it from the locked room? That was never explained."

Randolph cleared his throat and spoke to the sailor. "Now that his attempt to get your property has failed, shall I draw up a charge against this man?"

"Why, Randolph," my uncle said, "do you think it is over? Do you think Wainwright came here just to sell someone a golden casket?"

Randolph cleared his throat. "No, no. He did say he wanted to buy land."

Abner turned again to the sailor. "You see that we have not finished. Have you finished?"

Wainwright looked at him with respect. "No, I had not."

"Did you come here to buy land? Was that your real purpose?"

"That was a part of it, in truth."

My uncle gestured. "Take the papers from your pockets."

When Wainwright had done this, Abner resumed. "In reality, you crossed the mountains looking for four men: Rowell, Randolph, my brother Rufus, and me. Those names are on a bit of paper."

"That is true."

"There was a reason for that. It lies in that deed you hold in your hand. Who deeded that land?"

The dark man gestured. "You know him. That man. Rowell."

"Who bought it from him?"

"My half-brother, Asa Rogers."

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Rowell's face began to shine again with tiny beads of sweat. He moved restlessly in the chair.

Abner was not unaware of this. His face was as stern as the Prophet Nathan's must have been when he called King David to account.

"What did Asa Rogers give for this land?"

Wainwright answered calmly. "Two matched pearls. He was a sailor like me, and he wanted to settle down five years ago. He traded for the land, but he caught the pox right after and died. I was his only heir."

"And you were at sea until a few months ago," said Abner. "When you came back, you found that you had inherited two hundred acres of land."

"That is so."

"You have seen the pearls?"

"I have. My brother showed them to me once."

Randolph spoke up. "Rowell has two fine matched pearls in his collection. He let me see them a few years ago."

Abner continued. "The trade took place in Baltimore?"

"It did. On the waterfront, where this knave says he goes on business."

"Had your brother seen the land?"

"No, nor have I."

My uncle changed the subject. "Did you invent the story of the gold box?"

Wainwright shook his head. "No, that is as it was told to me. If it is only a tale, the Egyptian made it up."

Uncle Abner touched the box with a big finger. "But the story was useful. It made the box more attractive, more valuable. You offered the box to Rowell to get him to show you his treasures. You wanted to see the pearls in his possession. He would not open that locked room. You were a stranger, and he does not trust strangers."

"That is true."

"Then you lost your temper and struck him to the floor, drawing blood, and left. You had no proof that he signed this deed."

The sailor's face darkened. "That is it, in part. Besides that, he said the box was a cheap thing, to be bought from any swab in any port on the coast. He offered me ten dollars. For pure gold!"

Abner pushed the box aside. "Two hundred acres of land for two fine pearls. If you have not seen the land, why do you come looking for the pearls?"

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Wainwright spat out his answer. "Because the title's no good, and I want the pearls back—or good land instead!"

My uncle picked up the deed and opened it. "The title is bad? Why is that?"

"When I went to record it in my name, I found that the land had been titled long ago to someone else."

"Yes," said Abner, "to my father."

"And you and your brother Rufus are his heirs."

"Yes. That land now belongs to Rufus."

The sailor started to speak, but Abner stopped him. Instead, he strode over to Rowell. "Rowell," he said, towering over the shrinking creature in the chair, "you remember the two hundred acres of land your father owned before he came here. Where was it?"

"On the South Branch of the Potomac," the quivering hulk gasped.

"Who bought it?"

"Your father."

"And you traded it to this man's brother for two pearls—land you did not own?"

"No—no—"

Uncle Abner thrust the paper in his face. "This is your signature. Do you deny that?"

Rowell made brushing motions with his hands, as though he would push Abner away.

"No, Abner. I'm a fair man. I deeded him a different tract."

My uncle motioned to me. "Martin, go to your father. Tell him to give you the deed to the land on the South Branch. Bring it here, and we can let Randolph compare the calls on the land."

Rowell's eyes bulged in horror. "No, Abner. Don't have him do that. I admit it. I committed a fraud."

Abner stepped back as Rowell babbled on.

"I can't help it. Whenever I see something beautiful, I must have it. I will do anything."

My uncle's voice was filled with scorn. "You would cheat one man for two pearls and try to send his brother to prison for a gold box. When you spoke of the Father of Lies, you truly named your master!"

A silence followed. Randolph broke it by speaking to Wainwright. "You will get back your pearls. We will go with you to Rowell's house to see that he hands them over to you."

I was the only one watching Rowell as Randolph was speaking. I saw him straighten in his chair and reach under his cape. His hand came out clutching a pistol. He leveled it at the sailor.

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"Look out!" I cried.

At the same moment Adam Bird saw what was happening and lunged for Rowell's arm. Just as the pistol fired, the old preacher knocked it aside. The bullet flew wide, in the direction of Randolph's desk. There was a metallic sound and a thump.

Abner turned and tore the pistol from Rowell's hand. Wainwright started toward them with a growl of outrage.

Randolph's indignant outburst stopped everyone.

"Rowell!" he spluttered. "My office! My home! Before my own eyes you try to kill a man! You will stand trial for this."

Before anyone could speak, Abner intervened. "Wait, Randolph. See what his bullet did."

Randolph looked down. The box was gone from the desk and now lay on the floor. It could no longer be recognized as a box. The bullet had passed through the lid and bottom, leaving a gaping hole in each and opening the soft metal like the petals of a lily.

"Randolph," said Abner, "I doubt that Rowell could endure the shame of a trial. Look at him now. He should be seeing Dr. Storm, not a jailer."

It was true. The huge creature had lost all color and was gasping.

Abner looked down at him. "How many acres are there in your home place, Rowell?"

"Three hundred," whined the wretch.

"It is good land, although you have been a poor steward. Now, Rowell, it is better than you deserve: if Randolph agrees, will you give up most of that land?"

"If I agree!" exclaimed Randolph. "I insist on it!"

"I accept," Rowell murmured.

"Let him keep—" Abner began.

"His house and five acres," Randolph said firmly. "The rest will be deeded to Wainwright."

Abner walked over and picked up the battered metal. He looked at the sailor.

"Do you still wish to sell this?"

Wainwright shook his head. "It has served its purpose, though not as I intended. It is yours, for what you have done."

"Then," said Abner, "let there be an end to it as a center for strife. The gold came from the earth and was fashioned into an object of tribute, if your story is true. It is now an ugly thing. Let it go back to the earth."

He took me aside and gave me the box. "Martin," he said in a low

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voice, "tell nobody what you are about to do. You know the bog on Dixon's land? The place of sucking mud and quicksand? Take this and throw it into the middle of the quicksand."

He turned to the sailor one more time. "Wainwright," he said, "you are more fortunate than you know. This man is as great a liar as his father. When that man offered my father the two hundred acres, he asked a high price. My father refused, for he had seen the land. It is a tract of steep hillsides, cliffs, fallen boulders, and scrub trees. He bought it at last for five pennies the acre. For two pearls, your brother would have been cheated."

"Worthless?" the sailor said, puzzled. "But your brother still keeps it."

"To every thing there is a season," Abner replied. "That season has not arrived yet."

NEXT MONTH . . .

14 ***NEW*** stories—including

EDWARD D. HOCH (about Rand)

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PETER LOVESEY (about a man with a fortune)

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Nick Velvet is the unique thief who only steals "valueless objects" for a minimum fee of $25,000 (inflation has finally caught up with Nick's charges). Usually Nick works alone—it's the safest method. But this time he enlists the 125th Street Irregulars, a gang of four leather-jacketed Harlem teenagers, to help him do a rush job . . .

THE THEFT OF THE FOUR OF SPADES

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Nick Velvet rarely ventured into Manhattan except on business, so he could understand Ron Saturn's surprise at encountering him on West 43rd Street during one of New York's periodic spells of late-summer mugginess.

"Nick!" the little man greeted him. "Nick Velvet! I haven't seen you in a couple of years, and I sure didn't expect to see you in town on a day like this! Isn't this weather terrible?"

"I like to see how you city people live," Nick replied with a smile. Ron Saturn was an aging chorus boy who'd appeared in a few Broadway musicals. But his small stature had kept him from ever hitting it really big and in recent years he'd turned his talents to assorted confidence games involving wealthy, lonely women.

"We're not living well these days, Nick," Ron replied glumly. "All the big money's in Saratoga or the Hamptons this month. And the new musicals don't start rehearsals till October. But what brings you down here?"

"Nothing shady, Ron. Just a bit of shopping for Gloria's birthday."

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"How is she? I miss seeing the two of you."

"She's fine. I'll tell her I ran into you."

Ron Saturn scratched his ear in a gesture Nick remembered from the past. "You know, running into you just might be the answer to my prayers."

"I didn't know you ever prayed, Ron."

"Just a figure of speech, Nick. But look—would you be free for a job this evening? It's for a friend."

Nick hesitated, glancing at his watch. "I generally need more time for planning. I don't know if it could be done that fast."

"Come talk to my friend anyway—okay?"

"Sure, Ron. Anything for a friend."

Nick had known Ron Saturn for so many years, off and on, that it was hard to remember how the friendship had come about. It dated from the years following Nick's army service, when he and Ron had worked together at a marina in Westchester County. They'd taken different paths to success after that, but each had always known that at times the other operated outside the law.

Since Nick had been headed back to Grand Central for the train home, they stopped in the lobby of the Biltmore Hotel for a drink while Ron phoned his friend. He was on the phone for some time before he returned, smiling. "He's on his way over. Cary is—well, difficult at times, but you'll like him."

"Cary?"

"Cary Temple, the actor."

"Oh!" Cary Temple was a vigorous man in his fifties who'd achieved a certain fame in his younger days playing Shakespeare in Central Park and at Jones Beach. He'd even handled the lead in *My Fair Lady* in one of its road companies. But Nick hadn't heard his name mentioned in years. He had truly fallen on hard times if he'd hooked up with Ron Saturn on a confidence scheme.

They were just starting their second drink when Temple arrived. His face had aged a bit and his fine head of hair was an unnatural shade of brown, but his handshake was vigorous and his eyes had all their old matinee sparkle. "Velvet! Ron has always spoken highly of you! A pleasure to meet you at last!"

"The pleasure is mine," Nick murmured. "I've seen you on stage many times."

"Yes." Cary Temple smiled sadly. "Those were better days I fear. But Ron tells me you can assist with a little enterprise we have going."

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"Possibly. I generally need a little time for preparation. You both know my terms, I'm sure." He paused, making sure there was no one close enough to overhear. Then he asked, "What do you want stolen?"

Cary Temple glanced at Ron and cleared his throat.

"The four of spades from a deck of cards. Possibly from several decks of cards."

"That certainly falls within my province of stealing only valueless objects. Where are these cards located?"

"In the Fifth Avenue apartment of Sarah Wentworth."

Nick thought about that. Sarah Wentworth was a revered widow of the former American ambassador to the United Nations. Long active in social and political circles, she'd become a darling of the media since the death of her husband in a plane crash two years earlier. Columnists constantly linked her with eligible middle-aged men—and some not so eligible. "Her place will be well guarded," he said.

"There's heavy security in the building," Temple agreed, "but I can get you in."

"You mentioned several decks of cards. Are they all in one location?"

The actor hesitated. "No, there's a second location involved. The apartment of one Amanda Jones, on 126th Street."

"Harlem?"

"East Harlem, to be exact. I have the address here. In each case you are to steal the four of spades from all decks of cards you find in the apartments. But take nothing else—only the fours of spades. And leave no signs of a robbery."

"What about new, unopened decks of cards?"

"Those too, if you find any. Can you do it?"

"Not by tonight. It would mean casing two layouts. Give me forty-eight hours."

Temple shook his head. "It has to be tonight."

"Sorry." Nick started to rise from the table and Temple turned on Ron Saturn.

"I thought you told me he could do it?"

"He *can*, Cary! Calm down. If anyone in the world can do it, Nick can. Look, Nick, what's your fee now?"

"Twenty-five."

"It's worth thirty to us if you can do it tonight. Right, Cary?"

"That's correct. Thirty thousand."

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He moistened his lips as he said it, perhaps remembering better days when he'd earned that much for a week's work on Broadway.

Nick considered the offer. "How would you get me into Sarah Wentworth's apartment?"

"That's the easy part. She's having a cocktail party this afternoon and you could go with me."

"Wouldn't she think that odd?"

"Not at all, dear fellow. I often bring Ron or someone else. But finding and stealing the cards will be your responsibility."

"The other one—Amanda Jones—has to be done tonight too?"

"That's correct. Shall we be on our way?"

Against his better judgment Nick said, "All right."

There was only time for a quick phone call to Gloria, explaining that he might have to stay in town overnight. "Are you working?" she asked, and when he replied in the affirmative she didn't question him further. She knew she'd hear all about it later.

Ron Saturn left them at the hotel and Temple glanced at his watch. "Just after five. If we take a taxi we should arrive just in time for cocktails."

The apartment, a luxury co-op overlooking Central Park, was already crowded by the time they arrived. Nick recognized some familiar types—show-business people, publishing figures, and a sprinkling from the United Nations. Some wore street clothes because they'd come right from work. The show people, between engagements or awaiting the evening curtain, dressed more elaborately. But the star of the party was the hostess, and Sarah Wentworth was as strikingly lovely in person as on the front page of the latest supermarket tabloid. Still in her early forties, she exuded the sort of fashionable sexuality one usually found in models and starlets still in their twenties. "Nick Velvet?" she repeated, shaking his hand. "I should know you. Are you in the theater?"

"No," he explained. "Cary and I have a mutual friend."

"He's a dear," she confided, patting Temple's cheek as she spoke. "I hope we'll be doing some business together." Then, "Enjoy yourself, Mr. Velvet. I'm so glad you could come."

She moved off to greet other new arrivals and Nick followed Cary Temple through the crowded room to the far end where two bartenders were serving drinks. "You expect me to do the job in a roomful of people?" Nick asked under his breath.

"I'm sure you'll find a way." The actor smiled and accepted a

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cocktail from the bartender, then went off to join a circle of familiar faces.

Nick stood in the center of the room wondering what to do next.

After a moment Sarah Wentworth approached him again, apparently noticing his hesitation to mingle with the other guests. "What do you do, Mr. Velvet?"

"Card tricks," he answered without really thinking.

"For a living?"

"No, just as a hobby. If you have a deck of cards I can demonstrate."

She smiled just a bit condescendingly. "Perhaps later."

She moved away and mingled with a couple wearing matching pink jackets. They were definitely show-business types, Nick decided. Studying an abstract painting that took up much of one wall, he found his mind wandering to Ron Saturn and Cary Temple, and the sort of scheme they were working. He remembered a movie once where a character under hypnosis was programmed to respond to a certain playing card. But something like that seemed unlikely with Sarah Wentworth. Besides, how would it connect her to a woman in East Harlem, a world away from this Fifth Avenue apartment? He was still puzzling over it as the crowd began to thin out. Obviously the guests were going off to dinner after their cocktails, and soon only a few stragglers remained. The hostess came up to Nick again and said, quite surprisingly, "I believe we're ready for your card tricks now, Mr. Velvet."

"Fine. I know a wonderful trick that can be done with six decks of cards. Would you have that many?"

"I doubt it, but I'll go look."

Cary Temple strolled over to Nick. "Going to entertain us a little?"

"I hope so."

Sarah Wentworth returned holding a boxed double deck used for Canasta, two bridge decks, and a pinochle deck. "I'm afraid these are all the cards I have."

Nick knew there was no four of spades in a pinochle deck, so he immediately set that one aside. "These four will do nicely, thanks." If she had produced more than the six requested decks, he would have found a reason to use them all. As it was he ran through some simple tricks he'd known since high school. They were good enough to impress Sarah Wentworth and that was all that mattered. By the time he carefully returned the cards to their boxes and departed with Cary Temple, the four of spades from each of the four decks was in his pocket.

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"You're good with your fingers," Temple admitted. "I was watching you and I didn't see a thing."

"I must have shuffled each deck fifteen or twenty times. I'd spot the four of spades on the bottom or when I was cutting, and slip it off the deck. A couple I palmed. One dropped into my lap and one went up my sleeve. It was perfectly safe. Even if someone noticed they'd just think it was part of the trick."

"Give me the cards," Temple said.

"I think I should get half of the money now."

"You'll get all the money when you finish up later tonight. Ron is rounding it up now."

Nick handed over the cards reluctantly. "Sooner or later she's going to know they're gone."

"They only need to be gone temporarily. Next time I'm up there I may be able to slip them back into the decks. But that's my problem, not yours."

"Are you taking me up to East Harlem now?"

The actor smiled and shook his head. "Now *that* is your problem, not mine. My face is too valuable to risk being worked over by some young punks after money for their next fix. Here's Amanda Jones's address. Good luck."

"Where'll I find you?"

"Phone me at this number. Ron and I will meet you with the money."

"It has to be tonight?"

"It has to be tonight."

Nick took the subway uptown. When he emerged from underground to find a gang of leather-jacketed teenagers taunting passersby, he was immediately sorry he didn't have a weapon on him. But they let him pass without incident and he walked the short block to the address on 126th Street.

It was a ground-floor apartment with a light in the window, and for a moment Nick thought he was in luck. A small sign in the window read: *Amanda Jones—Reader—Adviser*. He walked into the dim hallway, past a man sleeping on the stoop, and knocked on the door.

"What you want?" a voice asked from behind the door.

"A reading. Is Amanda in?"

The door opened a crack. "I'm Amanda."

"Can I come in?"

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A brown eye inspected him, then the door opened a bit wider. "Can't be too careful, 'specially at night. Come on in."

Amanda Jones was a fairly young woman with light brown skin and wide eyes that seemed to see everything. Nick thought she could be quite attractive if she dispensed with some of the costume jewelry around her neck and wrists and improved on a hair style that could only be called gypsy-wild in its present state. "You want a reading?" she asked. "Is that what you said?"

"Yes."

"Tarot or regular deck?"

That was when Nick realized his luck had run out. There were decks of cards visible everywhere in the small apartment, and many were 78-card tarot decks. How did one steal the four of spades from a deck in which the suits were called, if memory served him, swords, wands, cups, and coins?

"I'm not sure about tarot cards," he admitted. "Does a larger deck make for a more accurate reading?"

"Certainly. Though some customers prefer a reading with an ordinary deck, so they can get the technique and try it at home with their own cards." She smiled ruefully. "I lose more customers that way!"

"Let's try a straight deck first."

She looked him over and said, "That'll be ten dollars. In advance."

"Isn't that a bit steep?" He'd expected to pay twenty.

"Inflation, you know?"

Amanda Jones accepted his money and motioned toward a round table in the center of the room. She dealt out ten cards and arranged them in a careful pattern. After studying it a moment she announced his fate.

"You have a crisis to overcome but you will be successful. I see a great deal of money coming to you—perhaps from your labors or from an inheritance."

"I see. Could you do a tarot reading for me too?"

"That would be another ten dollars."

He laid the bill on the table between them and she rose to get the cards. "Do you get many customers up here?" he asked.

"Off the street, like you? Not too many. A few neighbor women, that's all. But you must be feelin' brave to come up here after dark."

"A friend recommended you."

"Who's that?"

Nick decided to take a chance. "Sarah Wentworth."

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"You know Mrs. Wentworth? She's *some* lady! I'm doing a reading for her tomorrow."

"Don't mention I was here," Nick cautioned. "I'm always kidding her about fortunetelling and I don't want her to know I tried it myself."

"That lady doesn't do a *thing* without a reading from the cards! She used to be my mother's customer and now I've got her."

"Your mother died?"

Amanda Jones shrugged. "She's in jail. It's about the same thing."

As she shuffled the tarot deck Nick asked, "These suits correspond to the regular card suits, don't they?"

"Sure. Cups is hearts, coins is diamonds."

"What about spades?"

"Spades correspond to swords in a tarot deck. Clubs are wands." She began to lay out the cards with their strange, garish illustrations. "I can give you a ten-card spread, a seven-card spread, or a royal spread. Which would you like?"

"Royal, I think."

She removed some cards from the deck, then dealt the remainder after first having him choose a king and four other cards. Her reading this time was longer and more complex, but the conclusion was the same. "See here? The ace of coins means riches and great wealth. It is the same money I saw in the spread from the regular deck."

"I guess I have to believe it, then."

"You'd be wise to." She smiled and scooped up the cards. Then, sensing there might be more money to be made, she added, "For an additional fee I can do you a special spread on your sex life."

"Another time, maybe. You probably want to close up and get home."

"I live right here. You wouldn't catch me out on those streets at night."

Nick had been afraid that was the case. Stealing the four of spades from all those decks without her knowing it would definitely present a problem. He thanked her for the readings and departed, hearing the bolts slam shut on the door behind him. Somehow he had to get her out of that apartment, but he didn't know how.

A gentle rain was falling outside, glistening the pavement and making him sorry he hadn't worn a raincoat. The street was nearly deserted, though he could see activity down on 125th Street. Not surprisingly, the gang of leather-jacketed youths still waited in the subway entrance. There were four of them, and Nick approached

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them warily. "How'd you like to earn some money?" he asked.

"How, man?" the tallest one asked. "By beatin' on your head?" He smiled and lunged forward as he spoke. Nick sidestepped and sent him spinning against the wall of the subway entrance. Then he grabbed the second one and twisted his arm behind his back.

"Listen, you punks! Do what I say and there's a hundred bucks each in it for you. Otherwise I'll hand out a few broken arms."

It was the sort of talk they understood. Nick took a few bills from his pocket, promising the rest later, and explained what he wanted.

Some twenty minutes later there was a disturbance on the sidewalk outside Amanda Jones's apartment. She came to the window, glanced out, and saw four youths fighting in the rain. She saw the glint of a knife reflecting the glow of street lights, and then one of the youths cried out and slid to the sidewalk. The other three took off running.

The wounded youth gasped and dragged himself up the steps to the door of Amanda's building. He managed to ring her bell before he collapsed again. Amanda had watched it all, and now she unbolted her door and moved cautiously toward the front steps. She opened the street door and knelt beside the bloody youth. "Are you hurt bad?" she asked.

"I—I don't think so."

"I'll call an ambulance."

"No! Just get me a bandage for this cut. I'll be okay."

It was dark on the steps and she had trouble examining the wound. "Can you come inside?"

"No. Bring me something out here."

She hurried to do so, forgetting her old fear of the streets at night. She was, after all, only in the doorway of her own apartment house. She came back with a wet cloth and a bandage, washing away the blood as best she could. "It doesn't look too bad. Sure you don't want me to call the police?"

"No, I feel better now. Just let me go."

"I don't know. I'd better report this. Those kids could be waitin' for you again."

"I'll be all right." He got to his feet, a bit shaky, and started down the steps.

She watched him for a time but he seemed to be walking all right. In fact, after half a block he broke into a run.

She went back inside and locked the door. She'd only been out of

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her apartment for seven minutes, but that had been long enough for Nick Velvet.

Nick met the four youths back at the subway entrance and paid them the rest of their money. He gave an extra twenty to the kid who'd played the injured one. "You'd make a great actor," he said. Then he caught the subway back downtown, hoping they'd spend their new riches wisely.

Nick had entered the building on 126th Street by picking the lock on the back door. He had then slipped into Amanda's apartment when she went out to help the apparently wounded youth on the front steps. With the apartment door open, Nick was able to hear their conversation and hide in a closet when she returned for the wet cloth and bandages. Then he'd completed his task, left the apartment, and gone down the hall to the back door, while she treated the boy on the front steps. He'd taken the four of spades from 17 regular decks, and the four of swords from eight tarot decks.

It was after ten when Nick reached Times Square and telephoned Cary Temple. The actor had been waiting for his call, and they arranged a ten thirty meeting at an Irish bar on Eighth Avenue. The rain had stopped but the pavement was still wet as Nick crossed the street and entered the place. A few customers stood along the bar watching a Friday night baseball game, but the tables and booths were empty. Nick chose one off in a corner and sat down to wait. He still hoped he could catch a late train and surprise Gloria.

Just after ten thirty Ron Saturn came in. He was alone.

"Hi, Nick. How'd it go?"

"Fine. Here are the cards."

"Good lord! All from Amanda Jones's place?"

"That's right. I even threw in some fours of swords from various tarot decks she had."

"That's great, Nick!"

"Tomorrow's the big day, eh?"

"What do you mean, Nick?"

"While I was stealing the cards from her I took a second to glance in a couple of books she had on the meaning of the cards. The meaning seems to vary from list to list, but it's generally about the same. The four of spades, or the four of swords in a tarot deck, means *Solitude, exile, retreat.* One book is specific enough to give the meaning as *Have nothing more to do with a certain person about whom you are doubtful.*"

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"Yes," Ron agreed. "That's correct."

"And Amanda Jones has a session with Sarah Wentworth tomorrow. Obviously Mrs. Wentworth wants to see what the cards say about a possible business deal with Cary Temple. He's still a charmer, and I imagine between the two of you a great deal of money has been removed from wealthy New York ladies. With a target as important as Sarah Wentworth you couldn't chance anything going wrong at the last minute. You especially couldn't chance the four of spades turning up in that fortunetelling session tomorrow. There are other bad cards in the deck too, of course, but from your standpoint the four of spades would be the very worst. If she believed it she'd call off the deal with Temple at once. You couldn't be sure if Amanda would bring her own deck or use one of Sarah's, so I had to steal the four of spades from both their decks."

"You're smart, Nick. You always were."

"You and Temple figured one missing card would never be noticed from the deck—not tomorrow, at least. And if Amanda discovered it later it wouldn't matter."

"That's about it."

"What's the con? What is it that Sarah Wentworth is supposed to dump her money into?"

Ron Saturn grew a bit nervous at the question. "You don't need to know that, Nick. In fact, the less you know the better. You know how these things are."

"All right," Nick agreed. "You've got the cards. Give me my money and I can still catch the late train home."

Saturn produced a thick envelope from an inside pocket. "It's not quite all there, Nick."

"What do you mean?"

"We can't raise the rest of it till Sarah comes through with the money Cary's expecting."

Nick felt a growing anger. "You know that's not the way I work, Ron. How much is here?"

"Ten thousand in small bills."

"Ten—"

"I know, I know! I told Cary you'd be angry. But play along with us, Nick. We'll have the rest of it tomorrow for sure."

"I'm not your partner in this, Ron. I have to be paid up front."

"I know, I know! I told Cary that. But we just couldn't raise that much money tonight. You'll have the rest before the banks close tomorrow."

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"Was Temple afraid to be here when you told me?"

"No, he's busy working out the final details of his proposal."

"Since I seem to have become an unwilling partner suppose you tell me about it."

"Like I said, Nick, you don't need—"

"I need to know if I have to wait till tomorrow for the rest of my money."

"All right," Saturn agreed. "I can tell you in a general way that it involves a performing arts center to be built in a city not far from New York. It would be to the arts what Meadowlands is to sports, drawing people from the entire metropolitan area. Cary approached her for some of the initial financing—a feasibility study to choose the site and determine the method of financing the construction itself. He hopes she'll give him a quarter of a million dollars for a start, with perhaps more later."

"I see. And the study will show the idea isn't feasible at all."

"Who knows? Maybe she'll get back her money and then some. Your thirty comes out of the two fifty, and we'll spend twenty thousand more on real consultants to make it look good. Cary and I split the other two hundred thousand. But when she told Cary she had to get a reading first from this Amanda Jones, we knew we couldn't take a chance on it coming out wrong."

"Why didn't you just talk to Amanda and offer her a thousand bucks to give a fake reading?"

"How could we risk approaching her? We didn't even know her. If she went running to Mrs. Wentworth all Cary's months of preparation would go down the drain."

Nick sighed and ordered another drink. He could see he'd have to spend the night in New York after all. "You'll give us till tomorrow?" Ron asked.

"What choice do I have?"

Nick took a room at the Biltmore overnight. In the morning he phoned Ron Saturn and learned they were awaiting a call from Sarah Wentworth. The reading was to be at eleven, and they hoped to have the money by noon.

Noon passed and nothing happened.

Nick phoned again as he was checking out of his room at one o'clock. This time Cary Temple answered.

"Don't worry, Velvet. It's just a slight delay. Ron and I are going over there in an hour."

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"Good. I'll be waiting for you at the park entrance across the street."

"It might be wiser to remain at your hotel."

"I'm checking out," Nick replied. "I'll be waiting across the street." He hung up before Temple could respond.

Nick reached Sarah Wentworth's apartment building in the mid-sixties just before two o'clock, in time to see Saturn and Temple leave a taxi and walk past the doorman. He found a bench just inside the park entrance and settled down to wait. Though the sky was cloudy there'd been no further rain and he could hear young voices from the children's zoo nearby.

He waited for over an hour but the two men did not reappear.

He stood up at last and started across the street. Certainly it didn't take this long to give a final pitch and pick up the check. It was time to investigate the possibility of a rear entrance, and the growing suspicion that his old friend Ron Saturn was pulling a double cross.

He'd crossed the street and was starting to circle the building when he saw them coming out the front door—Saturn and Temple, and two other men. One of the men walked to the curb and signaled a waiting car. Nick kept walking. The men were detectives, and Saturn and Temple were almost certainly under arrest.

He didn't see the other person come out of the apartment building, not until Amanda Jones spoke to him. "Well, don't I know you from somewhere?" she asked with a grin.

"I—"

"Were you waiting for your two friends? They had a previous engagement—with the police."

Nick took a deep breath. "I think I'd better buy you a drink."

They walked south a few blocks to a hotel cocktail lounge and Nick ordered the drinks. "Do you want to tell me what happened back there?"

Amanda Jones smiled again, obviously enjoying herself. "What were you after up at my place last night? You were working with those two, weren't you?"

"I did them a favor, yes."

"That boy who got hurt on my doorstep—it was to get me out of my apartment, wasn't it? Fake blood, wasn't it?"

There was no harm in admitting it. Nick nodded and said, "I took the four of spades from all your decks."

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She laughed out loud. "Man, that's the craziest thing I ever did hear!"

"They were afraid if the four turned up in your reading for Mrs. Wentworth it would cool her toward Cary Temple's scheme." He took a drink and lit her cigarette. "Now it's your turn. Tell me what happened up there."

"I did her a ten-card reading with my tarot deck like I always do. I'll admit I didn't notice any missing card. But when I spread the deck, card number two, showing the immediate influence on the questioner, was the moon."

"The moon?"

Amanda Jones nodded. "It's a bad card in the tarot deck, signifying deception, trickery, dishonesty, insincerity, double dealing. Mrs. Wentworth took one look at it and decided to call a friend of hers at police headquarters."

"Are you telling me Temple and Saturn were arrested because of a tarot reading?"

"Not entirely. But the police apparently had two other complaints from wealthy women about Temple collecting money for this arts-center scheme. They sent a couple of detectives up to be present when she gave him the money." She was smiling again. "I guess that's the end of this con game for now."

"I didn't know there'd been others," Nick admitted.

"It was all in the cards. They never fail me. That moon card told it all."

"I'll tell you something—they failed you last night when you did my reading and said I'd receive a great deal of money. Your reading for Mrs. Wentworth *cost* me a great deal of money!"

But Amanda Jones was still basking in her triumph and wasn't about to be shaken. "Your trouble was, you just thought too small," she told him.

"How do you mean?"

"You only stole the four of spades when you should have stolen the moon."

"Q"

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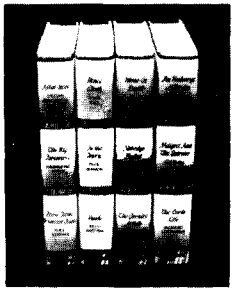

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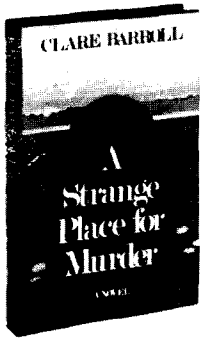

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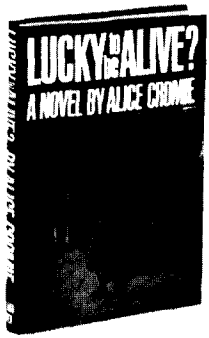

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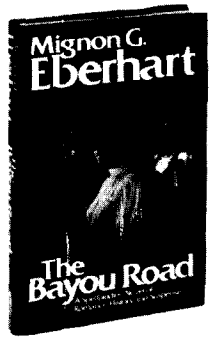

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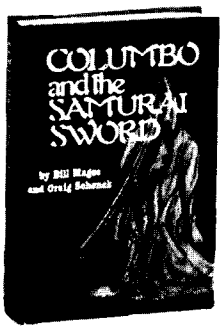

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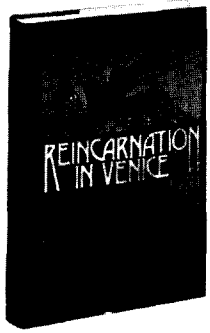

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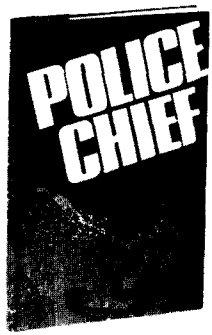

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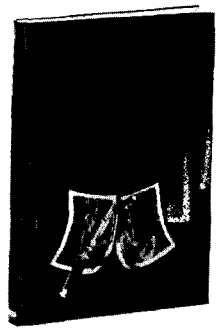

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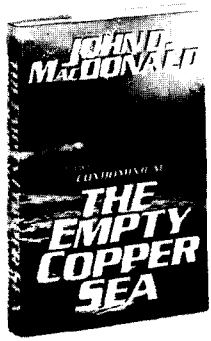
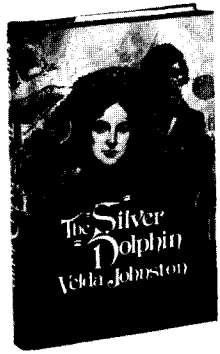


The Empty Copper Sea by John D. MacDonald. (Publ. Ed. $8.95)



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